

Kisetsu Morita

Illustration by **Benio**

Average of 25

x 365 days

x 300 years

x (2+4 EXP)

Level 99



★ ★ ★ I've Been Killing
SLIMES for **300** Years
and Maxed Out My Level ★ ★ ★

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***I've Been Killing
SLIMES for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level.***

 **Kisetsu Morita** **8**
Illustration by Benio





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Catgirl Undead
Pondeli

The Demon King
Pecora

Almiraj Minstrel
Kuku

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There Is a Reason They Say **Food Tastes
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Story by Kisetsu Morita Illustration by Benio

She slaughtered slimes for 300 years...

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★ ★ ★ I've Been Killing **SLIMES** for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level 8 ★ ★ ★

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**



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I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level, Vol. 8

KISETSU MORITA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by Benio

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SLIME TAOSHITE SANBYAKUNEN, SHIRANAIUCHINI LEVEL MAX NI
NATTEMASHITA vol. 8

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PERSE-
VERANCE
EQUALS
POWER. I
ONLY DO
THINGS I
CAN STICK
WITH!

AZUSA AIZAWA

The protagonist. Commonly known as the Witch of the Highlands. A girl (?) who was reincarnated as an immortal witch with the appearance of a seventeen-year-old. Before she knew what was happening, she'd become the strongest being in the world. Although she's had some rough times, it has ultimately given her a family, and she's delighted about it.

HALKARA

A young elf woman and Azusa's apprentice. She is an upstanding CEO who runs a company using her knowledge of mushrooms, but in the house in the highlands, she's known for her knack for screwing up. She is the main character of the bonus story, "Food for an Elf," that's included in this book.



WELL,
WHAT
SHOULD
I HAVE
TODAY?
♪



FALFA AND SHALSHA

Spirit sisters born from a conglomeration of slime souls. Falfa, the older sister, is a carefree girl who's honest about her own feelings. Shalsha, the younger sister, is considerate and attentive to others. They both love their mother, Azusa.

LAIKA AND FLATORTE

Red and blue dragon-girls who live in the house in the highlands. Laika is Azusa's apprentice and a good, hardworking girl. Flatorte is a cheerful, energetic girl who obeys what Azusa says. They tend to compete with each other as fellow dragons.



BEELZEBUB

A high-ranking demon known as the Lord of the Flies and the demons' minister of agriculture. She frequently shuttles between the demon realm and the house in the highlands. She's Azusa's reliable "big sister" surrogate and the protagonist of the spin-off in this book, "I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years, and the Demon King Made Me a Minister."





ROSALIE

A ghost girl and resident of the house in the highlands. She's devoted to Azusa, who didn't shy away from her as a ghost and instead reached out to her. She can go through walls but can't touch people. She can also possess others.

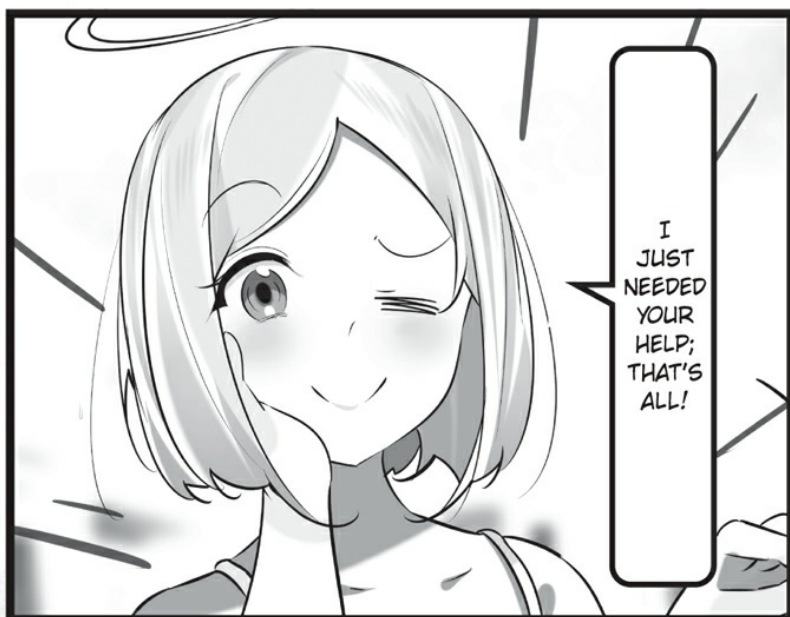
SANDRA

A mandragora girl. After growing for three hundred years, she gained sentience and the ability to move around. She is a literal plant and lives in the vegetable garden in the house in the highlands. She's often stubborn and puts up a front, but she also craves the company of others.



GOODLY GODLY GODNESS

The very being who reincarnated Azusa into this world. An upbeat and affable but careless goddess who fits perfectly in this world. She has a soft spot for women and tends to make lenient decisions.





PONDELI

An undead catgirl.
Hates working.
Loves games. She's a staunch shut-in and stayed inside until she died—and even after she died—but Beelzebub picked her up, and she now runs a game lounge in the demon lands.

MISJANTIE

A pine spirit. Though she was once revered as the being who mediated marriages, the practice has recently fallen out of use, and she's losing her cool over it. After meeting Azusa and the others, she set up a temple (branch) in Flatta.



MUUM MUUM

Nickname: Muu. Sovereign of the ghosts' kingdom of the dead, as well as the ruler of an ancient civilization that is now destroyed. Though she had holed herself up after growing fed up with her wet-blanket people (the poltergeists), she made a return to society (?) after coming into contact with Azusa and Rosalie. She has an accent and loves banter.





SANDRA GOT BIGGER

“Oh, great Witch, you have a package~”

It was another day exchanging the magic stones from slimes when Natalie called out to me.

“A package for me? What could it be? That doesn’t ring any bells.”

“Let’s see, it’s from the Aptoch city office in the province of Norai.”

“Where on earth is that...?”

I’d never heard of that before. What could have come from this mysterious city?

“It’s addressed to *The House in the Highlands, or in some cases, the Guild near the village of Flatta in the province of Nanterre*. I doubt this is a mistake. Oh, and this is it.”

Natalie produced a box of a rather considerable size.

A weaker girl might have groaned under its weight. Nah, that was more of an old man thing...

“Don’t tell me I’m going to trigger a spell when I open it.”

“I don’t think a spell like that is common. And the city-office seal is on it, so there is no question that’s where it came from, at least.”

“Okay, then I’ll open it here. If there’s been some sort of mistake, I’m going to return to sender.”

“For someone as strong as you are, great Witch, you are incredibly cautious...”

It’s because trouble always comes looking for me. Where’s some wood to knock on?

Just to be doubly sure, I first cast Dispel on it.

It was done with a simple incantation, so it was like insurance.

“Okay, there shouldn’t be any curses on it. No danger here.”

But what if there was still a letter asking me to take care of something troublesome...?

And they’re sending me some local delicacies as “thanks in advance”...

Well, my worry wasn’t going to change what was inside, so I opened it.

There were—

—several bottles filled with liquid.

“What is this?”

“Perhaps you unknowingly ordered some medicine that you need for your work, great Witch?”

“No, Natalie, I don’t have amnesia. I’ve been alive for three hundred years, but I’m still eternally seventeen.”

There was a clue—a letter on top of the bottles.

It’s not going to be a request to exterminate dragons or something, is it...?



“You can donate to your hometown taxes for gifts in this world, too?!”

But there was the name of the person who ordered it on a second sheet of paper— “Well, that’s one mystery solved.”



That night, I told the person who ordered the package that her thank-you gift had arrived.

“Ah, it’s here! I was just thinking it was about time. Your name is much more recognizable, Madam Teacher, so I put it under yours. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier~”

The culprit was Halkara.

“See, since I run a factory, I have to pay quite a bit in taxes, no? But I don’t get a single word of thanks. But if you *donate* to the countryside tax, you’ll get both a letter and a gift of thanks. I thought that was nice.”

It was obviously the same system as Japan’s hometown tax...

“And what’s the fertilizer for?”

“I thought Sandra might be happy if I used it on her. If I asked for some good cuts of meat as my thank-you gift, Sandra wouldn’t be able to eat it, you see. Oh, I did order some meat, though, and I think that should be delivered soon. I’ve donated so much to the countryside tax.”

It seemed like she had donated a whole lot to this tax pool while I wasn’t looking.

“I wanted to get something for Miss Rosalie, too, but I couldn’t find any local authorities giving out cursed dolls.”

“I’d want them to go bankrupt anyway.”

And I doubted Rosalie would want a cursed doll. Though she probably would want another ghost friend.

Halkara’s attention and care was commendable, though. Humans weren’t the only ones in this house. She was considerate to all kinds of different people.

Just then, Sandra the mandragora came in from outside.

“The wind is a little strong tonight, so I’m staying inside. My leaves will rip.”

“Sure, of course. It’s your house, too, so you’re free to come in when you want.”

When Sandra saw the bottles of fertilizer, the hue in her eyes changed.

“What is that?! It looks delicious!”

“You know what it is just by looking at the bottles?!”

“Oh, I’m so glad it makes you happy. This fertilizer has been the talk of the gardening world for a while now. I believe it might have great results on you, Sandra.”

“You’re a good person, Halkara! I knew people with more income have more emotional energy to spare, so they can be kinder to others!”

Her choice of compliment was very specific, but at least Sandra had a good opinion of Halkara.

“All right, why don’t we go out to the garden and try it?”

“Okay! I’ll absorb it all with my roots!”

I tagged along with them to the garden.

When Sandra found a nice place spot, she would spend her time sprouting and photosynthesizing.

She stuck her feet into the ground. “Halkara, try sprinkling it here!”

“All right. Let’s start with a third, okay?” Halkara opened the bottle and tilted it over.

Wait, a third? That’s kind of a lot... Are you supposed use so much with this kind of fertilizer?

Sure enough, I noticed the instructions on the bottle said, USE TWENTY PARTS WATER TO DILUTE.

“Halkara, I don’t think you’re supposed to pour it right on—”

“Glub, glub~ 🎵 Bigger and bigger you’ll grow~ 🎵”

Halkara was already pouring the fertilizer on the earth around Sandra’s feet, making it soggy. *Geez, and that’s concentrated! Is she gonna be okay?!*

“Aaaaaaargh! I’m so itchy! I bet for humans, this is like wolfing down some kind of delicacy!”

Sandra’s voice sounded muffled. I guess a good analogy would be that she was stuffing her face with caviar—but that was still on the scale of “tiny delights,” at least.

Sandra was changing in other ways, though.

“Huh? Sandra, are you getting bigger?” Halkara asked.

“What? Now that you mention it, I *did* feel itchy... Am I becoming a giant?”

Yes, Sandra was getting bigger!

She wasn’t really becoming a giant—it was more like she was growing up fast.

Her hair was growing out, and her limbs were getting longer, though not to a disproportionate level.

It was still unbelievable, though!

“What is going on...?”

A few moments later, right before our eyes—

There stood adult Sandra, now a voluptuous woman!

“Hey, my clothes are all tight... Am I just really full? But why are my arms and legs tight, too...?”

Both Halkara and I stared openmouthed at her.

She was just a little girl, and she had suddenly transformed into a virtual queen of the plant world.

“Oh, uh... I should apologize first, Sandra... I suppose that’s *Miss* Sandra now. I got the dose wrong... It was too effective...”

“What? What do you mean, Halkara? You mean I was supposed to take little sips at a time?”

It seemed as though Sandra still hadn’t totally grasped how her body had changed.

“Sandra, let’s head inside for now and take a look in the mirror...”

“What, was the fertilizer too strong? Did it make my face swell up?”

It was a little more than that, Sandra...

When we brought her to a mirror, her screams echoed throughout the house in the highlands.



The family quickly gathered, knowing something was up, and the panic spread.

“Lady Azusa, who is this woman? Is this Sandra?”

“Don’t be stupid, Laika. That can’t be Sandra. She’s obviously a plant spirit.” Flatorte was talking awfully big for being wrong. Too bad, Flatorte.

“Whoa... She’s like a totally different person... Is this a growth spurt? I never experienced that, being a ghost and all.”

Rosalie, it would be impossible to explain this as just a growth spurt. This was definitely because of the fertilizer.

Meanwhile, my daughters went rigid, unsure how to process the situation.

“You’re grown up, Miss Sandra. You’re *all* grown-up...”

“Our reign has ended. Now Shalsha is the youngest child again.”

At the very least, they weren’t happy about it. Having a younger sister (or something like one) suddenly become an adult would give you mixed feelings.

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On the other hand, Sandra was staring hard at her own hands and feet. Of course they would weigh on her.

“This body is so big—I worry about burrowing in the ground... But I think walking is much easier than it was before. And I think I will be able to photosynthesize more effectively now.”

That is definitely the reaction of a plant.

“How are you feeling, Sandra? Any adverse effects to your body?”

“No. Strong fertilizer wouldn’t dry me out. I have lived for a long time, you know. Don’t liken me to those insignificant baby grasses out there, please.”

Don’t diss the baby grasses.

“But my leaves have grown so long. I should cut them back a little to make it easier to move. Would the witches want my leaves? I can give them away.”

The leaves that acted as her hair had also grown out considerably.

“Halkara, do you know how to get her back to normal?”

“You have my deepest apologies. I will implement thorough safety management so a mistake like this will not happen again. I respectfully offer my apologies to those harmed by the incident and all related family members.”

She sounded like a company president apologizing at a press conference.

“So you don’t know.”

“There’s almost no precedent... I have no idea...”

A mandragora who could walk around like a human was super rare, so of course it was hard to know if anyone had ever experienced this problem before.

“Oh well. We’ll have to make some adjustments to make life easier for grown-up Sandra, huh?”

The first thing we needed to do was get her a new outfit.

Right now, her chest area seemed extremely cramped, and I felt somewhat attacked.

“Halkara, let Sandra borrow some of your clothes.”

“Understood. I will offer my greatest support to those harmed by the incident.”

“Can you stop talking like this is a press conference?”

—And so Halkara lent Sandra some of her clothes.

“My chest still feels too tight. I need bigger clothes...”

“Was that a snide remark? What does that mean?!”

“Halkara, why are *you* getting angry?!”

We borrowed clothes from Momma Yufufu, the droplet spirit, and they turned out to be the perfect size.



With that, Sandra’s life as an adult began.

But she was still the same on the inside, so I didn’t think there was much difference in what she normally did.

The following day, Falfa and Shalsha invited her to study. They were teaching her spelling and grammar.

“You should read this book today, Miss Sandra.”

“Here is a list of all the new vocabulary. Memorize the spelling by writing the words out ten times each.”

The sight of children teaching an apparent adult was a little uncanny—but the scene didn’t proceed as usual.

“Oh, I know how to read and write all those words, so I don’t need to do that. Give me something more difficult. Oh, let me see that history book Shalsha has.”

Did her intelligence grow along with her body?!

“No, you can’t just jump ahead in learning. You have to take one step at a time... Study is not an easy road...”

“I’m not jumping ahead. Here, I’ll read it for you, so bring it to me.”

Shalsha was confused, too. I think any teacher would be. She brought it over,

though, and Sandra smoothly read through it.

“Ohhhh, that makes sense. Political corruption used to be touted as the reason for this dynasty’s collapse, but that alone does not make for a very good argument. Back then, the development of agricultural land had reached a saturated state, culturally, and societal inequality was found all over the country. The administration failed to enact sufficient countermeasures, and there was an uprising as a result.”

I sure wasn’t following, but she sounded so smart!

“Miss Sandra, you get it...”

“Shalsha never thought this would happen... I’ve seen the limits of social sciences...”

I thought Falfa and Shalsha’s shock needed attention more than Sandra herself did...

After that, Sandra kept proving her genius everywhere.

“This is about as much as I can do for geometry, and this is what I can solve for algebra.”

“That’s amazing, Miss Sandra... Not even my sister, Shalsha, can solve that...” Falfa was blinking in amazement.

Shalsha wasn’t a STEM specialist or anything, but she loved to study. Sandra had left her in the dust...

If we’d poured an entire undiluted bottle of fertilizer on her, then would she have become the smartest person in history...?

What if she started saying things like *Humanity and all the harm they cause plants should be put to an end?* Yikes. We definitely were not going to try that out. Plus, we didn’t want her to suffer any adverse effects, either.

“I find the indoors more calming than the ground. Shalsha, do you have any nice poetry collections? I feel like reading some poetry alone on a quiet night like this.”

And now she was going elitist!

All her childishness was completely gone, both from body and mind!

“O-okay... I will go pick out a few from my room...”

Shalsha was overwhelmed, too.

All of us were struggling to deal with her sudden growth. It was like a first grader had suddenly become a grad student.

“Now then, Halkara? Do you have a moment?”

Halkara jumped when Sandra called to her.

“Er... What might you need?”

“You’re an elf, so you know all about fertilizer, don’t you? Can you take me to a city that sells a lot of it?”

Geez, she’s so straightforward now!

“I want liquid fertilizer that smells nice, like perfume. I need to keep appearances in mind, of course.”

She wants to use fertilizer as a perfume?!

I guess now that she’s bigger, she just jumped into sexual maturity, too... What’s a mom supposed to do about this...?

“I understand. I’ll take the day off from the factory tomorrow and bring you to a store in town... I suppose I am responsible for all this, after all...”

Obviously, Halkara couldn’t say no. Given her track record of bungling things, though, accompanying grown-up Sandra to town seemed like a recipe for disaster. I could easily see this going wrong.

“I’ll come with. I’m Sandra’s mom, you know!”

“Wait, you’re coming, Azusa? Ugh, having my mom tag along is so embarrassing...”

Sandra’s cheeks went red. Was puberty making her act like this?!

After living for over three hundred years, I was now suddenly experiencing life with a teenage daughter.

“I’m not gonna hold your hand or anything. That’s okay, right? Right?”

I didn't mean to, but I was suddenly acting like she held authority over me. I felt like she would forbid me from going anywhere with her if I made her angry.

"Fine, but don't treat me like a little kid. I'm all grown-up now."

"I know. I'll be sure not to."

If I'd had my smartphone on me, I'd definitely have been searching *how to deal with my teenage daughter*.

I'd never really thought about it since all my kids had been so young until now, but girls did get to be that age eventually, didn't they?

I was going to take on this task seriously and think of it as practice for the future.



The following day, we all hopped on Flatorte in her dragon form and flew to the capital of Nanterre province, Vitamei.

"The gardening stores should have all sorts of fertilizer."

"Sure, but I want to take a look at some clothes and accessories first."

Thinking about her appearance—she was acting more and more like a teenager.

"Mistress, look! She's going to spend money on *clothes*, of all things. All you need to do with clothes is just throw on whatever your parents buy you." Flatorte being Flatorte, her philosophy was more like a high school boy's. The girls were polar opposites. "And you don't even *need* to wear any during the summer. What a waste of money."

"Yes, you do! Keep your wild side under control!"

I had a feeling I was in for a trial.

Laika was pretty, and you might assume she took great care to maintain her appearance. In reality, she was more like a noble young lady and never worried too much about how she looked. I tended to be the one who taught her on that front.

Rosalie had a little rebel in her, but since she trusted me enough to make up

for it, I never really worried about handling her.

Point is, I didn't have any experience interacting with difficult teenage girls...

I thought back—*What was I like as a high school girl? I didn't get out much at all, so I'm no help!*

While I worried to myself, Sandra and Halkara walked down the city streets.

The people who passed us kept glancing back at them.

It was obvious to me they were looking at their chests. *Big boobs are hard to ignore, huh? Girls who have them might have an advantage if they want to climb the social hierarchy...*

Of course, boobs weren't everything—Sandra was the quintessential gorgeous young woman. After all that time as our sassy little sprout, this really was a huge makeover.

I was no Hikaru Genji, but now that I knew she would grow up to be so beautiful, I wanted to nurture her development as much as I could.

Sandra entered a women's clothing store, so Flatorte and I followed.

"It's all so expensive... Why can't we just save the money for something worthwhile, like meat...?"

Flatorte's complaint wasn't very feminine, but I let the statement go and watched Sandra closely.

She had picked out a few things and was trying them on in the fitting room.

The shop staff kept saying, "You look great in everything, Miss!" which made it hard to tell how genuine the claim was.

Still, even an adventurer's battle gear would look fantastic on a girl as beautiful as her. On the other hand, if an average-looking person wore the exact same clothes as a model, something would definitely look off...

Halkara and I chatted while she was changing.

"She's more mature now both in her looks and in general, so I find it easier to deal with her than when she was a child. I can manage her on my own. I'm sure we will be just fine."

“You might be right, but I’m still the closest thing she has to a mother. I have an obligation to look out for her.”

A little while later, Sandra emerged from the fitting room.

“Well? I liked this one the best.”

She looked great. Stunning. She could join the entertainment industry. But—
“Your skirt is too short! Try again!”

Those miniskirts would not do at all. Anyone could peek under when she walked up the stairs!

“Aw, come on. Everyone wears them this short nowadays...”

Who’s everyone? You don’t have friends who wear miniskirts!

“Nope! We don’t dress like that in the house in the highlands! No clothes that’ll show your panties!”

“Ugh, fine. *Sigh...* You’re so mean, Azusa...”

Sandra looked like she had more she wanted to say, but she listened to my opinion and changed her skirt to something a little longer. It was still a little short for my liking, but I could compromise.

When she went out into town wearing her new clothes, she garnered more attention from the people passing by than she had earlier.

I could hear the comments:

“Hey, did you see her?!”

“She was gorgeous!”

“This isn’t good... I hope she doesn’t get swarmed.”

“Ooh, like bugs? ‘Cause she’s a plant? Ha! Good one, Mistress!”

“Flatorte, that wasn’t supposed to be a joke...”

Afterward, Sandra got herself some liquid fertilizer to use as perfume, and she even bought shoes and accessories. That was a lot of money. *But did it have to be fertilizer? Could she not just use regular perfume?*

Sandra’s sense of style had risen by bounds in just an hour. I never thought

she would be so fashion-conscious when she grew up.

“Little Sandra is getting too into this. You just need one sturdy pair of shoes. Isn’t that right, Mistress?”

“We should take a couple of leaves from Sandra’s hair and make a tea out of it to drink...”

The life of a mediator was so hard sometimes.

Sandra and Halkara walked together in front, while Flatorte and I followed behind to keep an eye on them.

Halkara was also Sandra’s chaperone, so you could say she had another set of eyes on her.

Then, my greatest fear became reality.

“Hey, ladies, wanna grab some tea with us?”

“Might not believe it, but we are nobles, y’know!”

Some bald-faced playboys came and hit on them!

*Literally bald-faced. They’d probably shaved that morning.

“You’re an elf, aren’t you? What about you? Never seen a human girl with hair like yours.”

“Doesn’t matter what she is, does it? Why don’tcha come spend some time with us?”

They were so obvious that I couldn’t believe people actually did this. Maybe it should be considered something like a traditional art form.

I couldn’t just stand there staring, though. I was the mom, and it was my job to intervene.

On the other hand, I look seventeen, so won’t they just hit on me instead...? I guess they might, huh? Maybe I should go easy on them? But if that means they won’t take me seriously, I’ll just get angry...

Still, I didn’t really know how to deal with being picked up like this... In a way, it was more difficult than fighting monsters...

Then, I felt rage and deadly fury radiating from beside me.

“I’ll freeze them, Mistress! They’ll learn not to take us for fools!”

Oh no, Flatorte was being too aggressive!

“Please don’t. Settle down...”

I ended up having to stop Flatorte to save those boys from being beaten to a pulp...

“Why are you stopping me? They’ve got nothing on the inside; they could stand to cool down a notch or two. I’ll ice ’em!”

“No, wait! If you freeze them, you might actually—y’know, *ice* them! They’ll die!”

I couldn’t leave Sandra (and Halkara) alone, but I had to stop Flatorte. I was so busy for such stupid reasons!

Halkara looks ready to follow right after them... I should stop them...

However, my worries turned out to be groundless.

“Sorry. You aren’t my type.”

Wham. Sandra dumped the pickup artists and walked off, leaving them and her chaperone, Halkara.

“H-hey!”

“We’re not gonna do anything to you! No need to be so skittish!”

The boys held their ground. *You most definitely were. What, were you planning to sit down for a deep religious discussion?*

Sandra whirled around and looked at them.

She was clearly displeased, and she jabbed a finger in their direction.

“Look, your trunks are much too wiry. They’re weak! Your insides are hollow! If a man wants to win a woman’s heart, he needs a sturdier core! Make more use of your trunks! Come to me again once you’ve improved yourselves!”

At Sandra’s dramatic and vaguely threatening lecture, the two playboys complied. “O-okay...” “Sure...”

Wow, Sandra sure laid it on them. What a relief. I was so glad she wasn't the type to hang out with boys like that... She was never much of a delinquent anyway...

There was no problem letting her and Halkara walk around by themselves in that case. If they weren't interested in boys, the risk of trouble went way down.

"That was so impressive of you, Miss Sandra. I was thinking about having one cup of tea with them at least~"

Halkara really had no sense of danger! *Protect yourself more, please!*

"Their trunks were nothing special. Well, now that we've finished shopping—"

It was just about time to go home. It felt like we'd spent way too much money, but there was no harm in splurging now and then.

"—since we're in the city anyway, perhaps we should find some good guys."

Wait. Is she looking for boys?!

Not happening! Not on my watch!

"Er, Miss Sandra...? Aren't you still a little young for that...?"

Halkara, of course, finally did her job and intervened.

"Being with other women puts my mind at ease, actually."

What kind of invitation was that?!

I still had to keep an eye on her. Was she really declaring she was going to look for boys, even though she flew all this way with me...? *I'm watching you!* I mean, I was walking right behind her. She didn't have to make her intentions so obvious.

"Why are you responding to *everything* I say, Halkara? It's fiiine. I'm just looking. Just looking."

Just looking, huh? What, were you expecting a hot actor to show up like in some random play? No, that wasn't going to happen.

Anyway, I couldn't leave her.

Sandra kept moving forward, and I followed.

Moms with teenagers sure had their hands full...

We went along briskly.

There was an extra spring in big Sandra's step. Maybe now that she could walk quickly, moving forward had just become that much more enjoyable.

Halkara was sticking right beside her.

"Er, Miss Sandra, where are we going? We shouldn't just roam around looking for men... See, if Madam Teacher found out, she'd start to worry. Although"—Halkara glanced back at us—"Madam Teacher and Miss Flatorte are right behind us, so we can't step too far out of line anyway...which means there's almost no point in me being here."

Halkara was blunt about it, but she wasn't wrong.

"I see. The four of us can walk around together. Azusa, Flatorte, we should all search."

Sandra stopped and waited for us.

"'We'...? Look, I'm not going to let you wander around picking up guys. Mom is putting her foot down here."

"Didn't I just say I'm only going to look? I have some sense of restraint, you know. I'm not going to do anything bad. I know how to take care of myself."

I could relax when she said it so cut-and-dried like that.

Sandra touched her hair—or her leaves, rather.

"I have to. The witches will dish out so much money if I sell myself. I'm valuable merchandise."

"Hey! Girls should *not* talk about selling themselves!"

"Madam Teacher, I think she means her leaves! It's not anything lewd!"

"I know that, Halkara! I get it, but I am not fond of that word choice!"

I raised Sandra to be a bad girl... I mean, I didn't expect such a big growth spurt... It seemed like all her knowledge had reached adult levels when she grew up.

“Ugh, you’re so dramatic about this, Azusa. Everyone grows up. And grown-ups wear makeup and find new interests. They’re like buds that finally bloom.”

Sandra was quite the realist; she was eyeing me with exasperation.

Dammit, she was the age where she wanted to act like an adult...

“So just let me enjoy myself a little more, okay? I swear I’ll keep my boundaries!”

With that, Sandra strode off again.

“Ooh, I want to believe her, but girls her age can get so easily duped... Men are wolves...”

“Yep, and wolves are awful, Mistress. They always taste a little gamey, so venison is much better.”

“Why are we talking about food, Flatorte...?”

“By the way, Mistress, did a guy almost dupe you when you were young?” Flatorte asked me innocently.

I wanted to say *How rude, I’m still young!* but I was technically over three hundred years old. I recalled my previous life and thought.

“...Not really. Nobody ever really hit on me, either.”

My life was very peaceful, but it was also a little sad and depressing... I think I would’ve liked to have been hit on at least once...

Ever since becoming a witch, I’ve been generally revered, and I couldn’t remember ever being the subject of someone’s fancy.

Wait, am I not a hot character? I mean, I have daughters, so I don’t care, though!

—Then I heard Sandra’s voice coming from the corner she had turned ahead of us.

“Wow, there’s a good one! He has such a sturdy trunk!”

“Hey, wow, she’s actually going for it. Reminds me of when I was young!” Flatorte followed me as I hurried ahead.

“So you chatted up guys when you were young, too, huh?”

“Mm-hmm. Whenever I saw a strong-looking guy dragon, I’d ask him for a fight.”

You’re a warring people, huh?

“Man, I feel like other dragons always keep their distance, so blue dragons don’t really get married~”

“I can easily see that, but first, we need to protect Sandra!”

Sandra wasn’t super-duper strong like Laika and Flatorte, so it would be bad if she got into trouble with an adventurer.

We also turned the corner and made our way toward her.

There towered a large, magnificent oak tree.

Sandra was looking up at it in high spirits.

“Oh my gosh! He’s so hot! His roots are so firmly in the ground, even here in the middle of the city! I love the silent type!”

Sandra was just like a girl squealing over a male pop star.

“You meant trees?!”

I mean, she *was* a plant! I guess it wasn’t weird for plants to be interested in others of their kind! All my worries had been for nothing. This wouldn’t cause any trouble at all. She was keeping her boundaries!

“He’s great. Men need a good trunk. How can you have any dignity without a substantial trunk?”

Guess *trunk* wasn’t a metaphor.

Before I knew it, Halkara was also looking up gleefully at the grand tree.

“Wow~! You do such great work~! This oak is four hundred years old. I somehow feel like it could grow even more.”

“You get it, Halkara. His branches are graceful as well.”

“They are~ I suppose this is a more mature kind of allure~”

“I think this excitement is still too much for me. I am satisfied simply looking

at him.”

I’m just going to say this outright—I did not understand these two at all.

There wouldn’t be any trouble with Sandra picking guys up, it seemed, so I was relieved.

Afterward, Sandra found several nice, big trees and got all excited about them.

Halkara was having just as good a time as Sandra, which meant half of our quartet was gushing over trees. Flatorte and I were just bored.

“Oh gosh! This is just too much!”

“His pheromones are everywhere~!”

I guess so. It just looked like a plain ol’ tree to me.

“Wow. That is a lovely lady over there. She really exudes feminine charm.”

“Middle-aged women can shine, too. I suppose she’s an older woman who looks very young and attractive for her age.”

So this new tree was female... Since I looked extremely young for my actual age, I found myself confused by that observation.

“Mistress, I, Flatorte, could use a snack, so I want to go somewhere that sells grilled meat.”

“You are such a college guy.”

But Sandra seemed to be enjoying herself the entire time, and watching her brought a warm and fuzzy feeling to my chest.

She was my daughter, such as it was, and I was seeing her mature with my own eyes.

Sandra then spun around to look at me.

“Well, I got to look at a lot of guys, so why don’t we check out things that you all want?”

“What we want?”

“Yes. Clothes, medicines, food—there must be something you’ve been

thinking about, right?”

Oh, I guess this is what enjoying shopping with your daughter is supposed to be like.

I still considered myself young, and physically, I was. It would be fun, though, to really make the most of being a mom with an adult daughter.

“Sure. Okay then, you’re coming with me!”

“In that case”—Sandra grabbed my hand and tugged—“let’s get going! There’s a store I’ve been wanting to look at over there!”

“Sandra, you sure have a lot more energy now!”

“It’s because I can move around! I am not tired at all!”

Sandra had found happiness all because Halkara accidentally poured fertilizer over her. You never know what little blessings life might throw your way.

We went around and looked at all sorts of shops and stalls that girls might like. I was just enjoying myself shopping.

“Ooh, I can smell the aroma of lamb skewers!”

Flatorte quickly picked up some meat skewers in both hands and started scarfing them down.

Her dual blessings in this case were her lamb skewers.

Girls like her who ate anything were charming in their own ways. We were often pressured into a certain mold in the name of “femininity,” but there was far more than one way to be charming. Still, Flatorte might have been going overboard.

“That’s supposed to smell ‘good,’ I see. I understand it better now that I’m grown, but I still don’t think it smells that delicious.”

“That’s because you’re a plant. It’s fine. All right, let’s check out those accessories there.”

“I am not interested—well, no, wait. Looking at them now, they are a little interesting.”

I had a feeling that Sandra was generally more honest with herself. I guess I

could say she'd matured in this way, too.

"If there's anything you want, go ahead and get it. We have plenty of money."

"Yes, Halkara makes a lot of money at her factory."

Halkara puffed out her chest with pride behind us. Well, that money was in a separate account. I wasn't using Halkara's profits for my private use.

At the accessory shop, Sandra bought a hairpin with a red jewel on it.

"You like that one, huh?"

"To be honest, I'm not really sure if this will look good on me. But I thought it might be good to learn how to dress nicely. I'm not living mostly in the earth like I was when I was alone." Sandra then shyly scratched her face. "And I know my clothes will get soiled from the dirt...but I still don't want to be the only one in the family with nothing but the clothes I already have..."

It was natural to worry about one's appearance. The effects of that fertilizer were genuine.

"True. If you ever want anything more stylish, just let me know. I'll give you some money." I placed my hand on Sandra's head.

"Okay, I'll ask you if that happens."

It seemed like she was still a little embarrassed, but Sandra smiled, a hint of red on her cheeks.

Shopping with my teenage daughter was a great thing.

"Madam Teacher, the sun is starting to set," Halkara said, and I noticed the sky was turning orange.

"You're right. I guess we'd better head home."

Falfa, Shalsha, and the others would be waiting for food. I was in charge of dinner today.

"Azusa, wait just a second!" Sandra said hurriedly, then ran off toward the street.

I wondered if there was still another shop she wanted to check out. We didn't usually get this opportunity, so we could stick around a bit longer.

The three of us waited for about ten minutes before Sandra returned. Her hands were behind her back, as though she was holding something.

“What did you get, Sandra?”

“Azusa.....this is for you!”

Sandra thrust out a bouquet of red flowers.

“Oh, th...thank you... But why...?”

I was caught a little off guard, then looked back and forth between the flowers and Sandra, who was looking down with her arms outstretched.

“I-it’s my thanks! ...You’ve been taking good care of me so far, so fair’s fair! Argh, don’t make me say any more! Just take it! Don’t waste the flowers’ lives!”

It felt as if a dart had flown right into my heart. Sandra holding out flowers, though, made it seem like she was offering the lives of her kin...

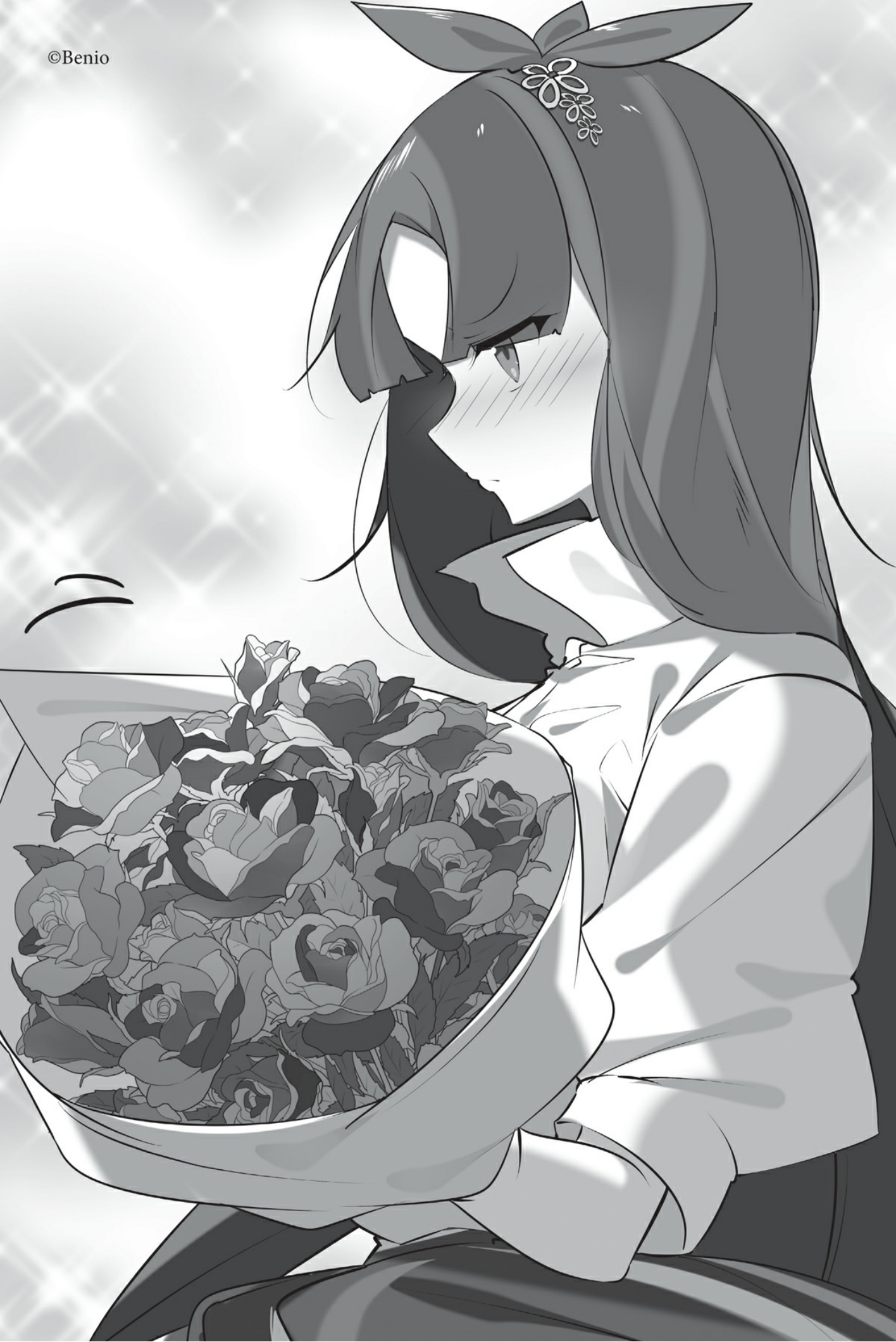
Let’s put that aside for now.

“Thank you, Sandra, thank you!” I embraced my girl and her flowers. “I really raised a good kid! I’m so happy! I thought you were turning into a delinquent, but that wasn’t it at all!”

“You’re going to crush the flowers I just bought you... Geez...”

Even though Sandra complained, she didn’t look upset at all.

I wondered if this was how a relationship between a mom and a teenage daughter was supposed to be.





Sandra reverted to her original, little self a few days later.

“I guess the effects of the fertilizer wore off...”

We were all sitting around chatting in the dining room when the shortest member of the family, Sandra, entered the room.

Falfa and Shalsha seemed super relieved.

“I like it better when you’re small, Sandra.”

“I am relieved to talk with you like this. Sudden reform is not a good thing.”

Their line of thought was probably that big sisters shouldn’t get shaken up by things like this, so I had to take their remarks with a grain of salt.

“What are you going to do, Sandra? Are you going to use the fertilizer again?”

Sandra thought for a moment, touching the hairpin on her head, then replied with a smile, “I’ll stay this way for now. I’ll use the fertilizer only for special occasions.”

From then on, Sandra’s scholastic ability went back to normal, contrary to the leaps and bounds she’d made when she was bigger. The twins were relieved about that, too.

On the table, by the way, was a vase filled with flowers that were still brightly colored.

They were my gift from Sandra.

WE WENT TO A DEMON ARCADE

“How have you all been~? Especially the girls~?”

During dinner, Beelzebub popped over for a visit like it was nothing.

“Did you eat already? If you haven’t, then why not join us? We got some good figs today, so I made a sauce out of them.”

No one was surprised anymore when Beelzebub came over. She was kind of like our next-door neighbor. Though, there were no other houses near the house in the highlands, so we didn’t have any neighbors, strictly speaking.

“I suppose I might. I also brought some Veritart grapes and Veritart lemons as a gift. They were raised in the cold regions.”

Beelzebub produced some massive grapes and lemons.

“I’m guessing those are going to be sour. Could you bring something sweeter next time...?”

“Demons love the tartness. One can make a drink out of this that will wake you up in the morning with a good jolt. It’s perfect for tackling hangovers as well!”

“Then I’ll use them for Halkara.”

“What! Why are they just for me?!” Halkara protested, but as someone who had seen her hungover and pale with alarming frequency, I ignored her. If she could recover with one drink, this solution was a no-brainer.

Beelzebub brought over a chair from the corner, like it was business as usual, and sat between Falfa and Shalsha. It practically felt like she lived here now.

“So, Miss Beelzebub, what brings you here today?” Laika had learned how to receive Beelzebub as well.

Most of the time, Beelzebub brought requests or invitations with her. When

she had neither, she brought more gifts with her. Simply coming over empty-handed was apparently frowned upon among the demons.

“You must know how we demons established diplomatic relations with the Thursa Kingdom in secret not too long ago, no?”

I mean, I was there.

The Thursa Thursa Kingdom was a husk of an ancient civilization populated entirely by ghosts. The ghosts themselves seemed to be having a good time, though, so it wasn't much of a problem.

However, if humans found out about them, there was some danger of them being exorcised, so Pecora wouldn't be making any public announcements about it to the demons.

I mean, with the demon king sitting at the top, the demon world wasn't a popular sovereignty. She could establish all the diplomatic ties she wanted.

“The Thursa Thursa Kingdom taught us a bit of their ancient magic technology. There is no question that the town around Vanzeld Castle will be developing rapidly in the future.”

“That is a grand plan.” Laika was simply praising her, but technological innovations for the demons would be terrifying to a human who was afraid of them...

“I hear a shop that has made use of this ancient magic is just about to open. Why not come take a look? You already know the owner. Perfect, no?”

If it was someone we knew, then that naturally eliminated a lot of people.

“Did Fighsly get some money to open a shop?”

If anyone was the greedy kind, it was Fighsly the fighter.

“No. Here, just look at the flyer. I think the children will quite enjoy this~”

The flyer Beelzebub produced was written in the human language. I wondered if she went out of her way to translate it for us.



“This doesn’t really tell me much...”

What I could tell, though, was that Pondeli had made it. After all her time spent inside playing games, she knew so much about them. She’d even made a card game, so she had the skill.

“We need to be discreet in our use of ancient magic, you see. Though it’s currently limited in its use, we are thinking about increasing its scope if the test run at Pondeli’s store proves successful. I shall grant you special privileges to play there just before its opening!”

Now I knew the motive behind Beelzebub’s visit.

“So you want us to test out the store.”

“What a terrible way to put it! You are the first people to be invited to this shop before its grand opening. Be thankful!”

Even though I could imagine this creating trouble, there was still something for us to be thankful about.

My three daughters were the most excited I'd seen them in some time.

"An arcade... I don't understand what that means, but it brings me joy... I feel like a flower blooming."

"Falfa is so excited!"

"We need to be careful—money can fly out of your hands at a place like this. The wise thing to do is decide how much change we'll need ahead of time... I want to make a habit out of simplicity and frugality..."

I didn't think the arcade would have any lesser effect. In a way, there were only so many things children could play with in this world, so it was perfect.

Well, Falfa and Shalsha enjoyed their studies and research like normal, so it hadn't really been a problem.

"Mommy! Let's go! Falfa wants to play!"

"We must go and inspect this store."

"I-I'm not really that interested... But we can't not go after we've been invited..."

Sandra's genuine feelings were obvious despite her sour exterior, which was cute. That reluctant front was such a cute kid thing. If they acted like that even after growing up, though, they were just a pain to deal with...

She wasn't the only one excited—but Rosalie had different reasons as she whirled in circles by the ceiling.

"An arcade... When I hear that word, I just want to hang around there as a ghost all day!"

You delinquent girl! Are you planning to make it a hangout spot for you and your delinquent friends?!

By the way, even though Rosalie never did any evil, she was treated as an evil spirit. Spirits who had no regrets moved on to their next lives without remaining as ghosts. So spirits who hung around the earthly realm were, by definition, the same as poltergeists.

It was a mystery what regrets Rosalie still held, but I wanted her to stick

around as long as she could.

Anyway, we came to a conclusion.

“All right, everyone, let’s go to the arcade!”



The whole family went to the town around Vanzeld Castle.

I’d grown familiar with the city after the many times I’d come here. I generally knew what was on the big avenues.

Of course, it didn’t seem like the arcade would be right on the main street.

“It is in a spot that’s a bit tucked away. Rent on the main avenue is high, so a business needs to be thriving to set up shop there. We will be testing it out somewhere quieter first.”

Beelzebub entered a tiny street just off the avenue and proceeded down an even narrower path.

I might be biased, but the demons walking around here looked like bad dudes.

Halkara was frightened. “I’m going to get mugged...”

“There have been reports of terrible threats being made in this area. Well, if someone did try that with us, they would be immediately arrested. There is no need to worry.”

“But still, shops in a place like this must really want to keep quiet about their businesses—”

An establishment with a rather colorful, gaudy sign appeared before us.

It probably read ARCADE PON☆DE☆LI (but it was written in Demon, so I couldn’t read it).

There were even cat ears on the roof. *Bet it’s because Pondeli used to be a catperson...*

“It’s so bright... This place really stands out...”

“Success for a shop like this rests on its impact. We have also used glass for the entrance to make the inside clearly visible. That should make it more

welcoming.”

When Beelzebub said that, I realized she was right.

“Now, girls, approach the glass doors.”

Stop calling them that; they are my girls! I thought, but my daughters paid that no mind and stepped forward.

The glass doors then slid open.

“Whooooaaa! That’s so convenient! We don’t have to open them!”

“Some magic must have activated when it sensed someone nearby. That is some high-level spell crafting.”

Falfa and Shalsha looked at the doors with great interest.

“I see, automatic doors...”

Even though it was totally doable without ancient magic, whoever’d implemented it would have had to create a special barrier around the entrance, which would have taken a lot of time and effort.

“Indeed. It moves on its own. Neat trick, no?”

Sandra made a beeline inside with Falfa and Shalsha right on her heels. The rest of us followed suit.

But these automatic doors had a bit of a problem.

Once a certain amount of time passed, the glass doors suddenly shut—
—with Halkara wedged between them.

“What is happening?! It hurts! I’m being squeezed in half!”

The doors were attacking Halkara!

“Ah yes, I forgot to mention that after the door is open for a moment, it will suddenly shut. You must take care.”

“We kinda figured that out already! Don’t forget important stuff like that!”

I guess the sensors didn’t hold the doors open if they still sensed people around...

“I see. There is a possibility of people getting caught in the doors. They need improvement—okay.”

I heard a decidedly calm voice that didn't belong to Beelzebub or a member of my family.

Pondeli was taking notes. She looked extremely pale—which was a normal shade for an undead.

“Oh, Pondeli, long time no see~”

“Hello! Feel free to play-test as many games as you like today. I want to get your feedback and make improvements anywhere there's a problem.”

Yep, we were guinea pigs. Still, maybe Halkara's noble sacrifice would help fix the safety problem with the entrance.

“Those doors of yours are dangerous,” Beelzebub pointed out.

“They are. I'll put a sign on the door that says *This establishment claims no responsibility for any harm caused by the doors.*”

“Hey! Just fix the thing!”

Don't try to fight your way out of it by waiving responsibility! This is your problem.

“The maintenance of ancient magic is so difficult~ All right, why don't you get started over there?”

There was a whole row of cabinets that looked like game machines inside. We were definitely in an arcade.

One in particular caught my eye; it was a booth that could fit about three or four people.

There was a curtain over it, as if it was an independent shop. It looked a little like a fitting room.

“Pondeli, what's that booth over there?”

“You are very sharp, Miss Azusa~ That is an attraction I call the Caricature Booth. Pay money, and you get an image of yourself.”

“I have a feeling there used to be contraptions like that back in Japan.

Amazing...”

I guess that meant this world had photography now. I wouldn't be surprised if there was an ancient spell like that.

That means I can take pictures of my daughters as they grow up!

I immediately scooped my three girls up in a hug.

“Let's go to that Caricature Booth over there!”

“Wow, Azusa, you're unusually demanding today.”

“It looks like fun, so Falfa is happy to try!”

“Shalsha is willing, too.”

What kind of pose should we do? Maybe funny faces? Well, maybe a normal smile first would be best. And I'll put my hands on my jaw to make my face look smaller.

And so we entered the Caricature Booth.

Inside, there was a table where a demon sat wearing something that looked like a beret.

“Welcome. One pic is a thousand koinne,” the demon said.

Koinne, by the way, was the currency of the demon world.

“...Here. A thousand koinne.”

Why was someone in here? Was this a staff member who operated a special machine?

When I handed over my thousand koinne to the demon, he started dashing his pen across the paper with incredible speed.

“Hoo! Hah! Hoo! Finished! Here you go!”

He handed me a picture of me with my three daughters.

Yeah, it was pretty good... Wait, this was literally a booth where someone drew a caricature of us! This had nothing to do with magic!

When we left the Caricature Booth, Pondeli was waiting for us with an expectant look.

“How was it? That was the best caricature artist in the entire Vanzeld Castle area!”

“There was nothing magical about it! Why did you show us this first?”

“Well, I know it’s not a game, but my instinct whispered to me that we needed caricatures to sit in front of the games. I wanted to make the atmosphere inviting for women, too.”

I wondered if she’d spent her past life in Japan, too.

“Regardless, I am going to take good care of this picture. It’s really well done. I’ll put it up at home.”

I wanted everyone else to have their caricatures done, too.

“Why don’t you check that one out next? It’s called Punch Striker!”

In that corner stood a skeleton demon—or someone who was made of bone, at any rate. I wasn’t sure if it was okay to classify demons like that.

There was also a demon standing next to it, wearing a mage’s outfit.

“Judging by the name...I guess we strike the skeleton...?”

“Yes, yes. Now why don’t we try it out?” Flatorte immediately stepped forward. “I, the great Flatorte, will show you the power of my punch!”

Flatorte got a running start—

“Yaaah!”

—and drove a forceful punch right into the skeleton’s chest.

I saw it coming, but the skeleton’s bones shattered, and it crumpled to the ground. Poor thing...

“Heh... This is what happens when I, the great Flatorte, attacks. Now, how is this supposed to be a game?”

The other demon standing beside the skeleton inspected the pile of bones, then wrote something down on a paper.

“Here, your score is ninety-five points. That’s today’s high score. Congratulations.” The demon handed the paper to Flatorte.

“...Huh? Oh, I don’t really get why, but I’m glad I got the high score...”

The demon then restored the skeleton’s body with some kind of Regeneration magic.

“Yes, that’s how you do it. You compete through points, and you get more based on how much of the skeleton you destroyed with a punch! It is perfect for relieving stress!”

“Couldn’t you have done this in a way that wasn’t so graphic?! It’s so sad thinking of the skeleton shattering to bits every time!”

“The skeleton and I hit it off at an undead get-together, so he came to work here. Please hit him as hard as you can.”

“Yes, I enjoy having my bones broken. It feels nice.”

I didn’t know Pondeli had those lateral connections. I also didn’t know the skeleton could talk...

“Oh, Madam Teacher, Miss Beelzebub said she had work to do and left,” Halkara reported to me long after Beelzebub had taken her leave.

She probably didn’t care about this about this at all...

“Next is Whack-the-Undead-Mole.”

“You sure are making use of your undead network!”

“Undead moles will appear from the holes, so please smash them with the attached morning star.”

“Please make it a wooden hammer! Or something that doesn’t have much force! Hitting them with a morning star will make things really gross!”

In the end, Laika was given a wooden hammer instead.

“Here I go! Hah! Yah! Rah! Hah! Yah!”

She whacked the undead moles in a rhythmical fashion.

Even using a wooden hammer, Laika the dragon still exerted a lot of force. Copious screaming ensued.

“Gwaaagh!”

“Weeeagh!”

“Eeeagh!”

The undead moles sounded like they were in pain...

Squish... Splurt...

One of Laika’s attacks finally popped out one of their eyes.

“Their screams are giving me the creeps!”

This was going to ring in my ears for ages. I really wished Pondeli just had them say *Ow!*

“I decided on this style for the sake of realism.”

“We don’t need realism for this!”

I didn’t think whack-a-mole was designed to satisfy one’s urge to slaughter moles.

Now done with the game, Laika returned to us with a dark expression.

“I...feel as though I have been forced to confront my own aggression... My heart has clouded over... I suppose power is nothing more than a tool to hurt others...”

“Laika, don’t let that get into your head, okay? It’s just a game! There’s no crime or punishment here!”

Hmm... It looked a lot like an arcade, but it was more horrifying than I’d imagined... This might have some adverse effects on the kids who visited.

It was heartwarming to watch Falfa and Shalsha hit the skeleton with their cute little punches, but whack-the-undead-mole would get gruesome for anyone, even children.

“Ooh...your bones are too hard... Shalsha might have hurt her arm...”

“Oh no, little miss, are you okay? We will use some Regeneration magic on you!”

And now the skeleton was getting worried!

The demon who revived the skeleton cast a Restoration spell on Shalsha. I

guess when someone wasn't strong enough, they could get hurt... There were a lot of problems here, weren't there...?

"Little miss, hit me here! It is more fragile!"

"Okay. I thank you for the instruction."

The skeleton was teaching her... This place was overall way more relaxed than Japanese arcades. It was full of human warmth—even though everyone here was dead.

There was still a fundamental problem, though.

"Pondeli, of all the attractions here, the automatic doors are the only things using the new magic technology."

It was unclear how much Pondeli knew about ancient magic, but she should have known it was full of magical techniques unknown to demonkind. Despite that, she was barely using it.

Even the Caricature Booth just had an artist inside. It wasn't even magic.

"No, we do indeed have an attraction that uses the magitech that Her Majesty bestowed on us. I am confident this next one will be one of the most—if not the most—popular game in this store!"

The most popular arcade games were usually—

"I call this the **Fork Doll Catcher!**"

When I heard the name, I had a general idea of what it was. *Oh, this is going to be a claw machine thing.*

"The game is over there! Please give it a go!"

Pondeli pointed to what looked like a glass case mounted on a piece of furniture.

There were several stuffed animals inside and what looked like buttons on the lower part of the case. If I pressed one of those buttons, the claw would start moving.

If claw machines had existed in medieval Europe, I bet this was how they would have looked.

The stuffed animals were all based off monsters—slimes, dragons, mummies, and the sort. The stuffed slime was pretty cute.

“Okay, then I’ll do this one, Pondeli.” I rolled up my sleeves as I approached the machine.

“Ohhh! You’re raring to go, Miss Azusa!”

“I think I’ve got a good idea of what to do. You’re using the new magic technology in the part that moves the claw, right?”

“I am impressed! You understand this well! That is exactly right. For a long time, I had been thinking about a game where the player retrieves stuffed animals, but it would have been much too difficult to operate the part that grabs them with our more familiar magic.”

It would have been a lot of work to replicate that distinctive arm movement with magic alone.

First, you needed some rather unique spells just to move an object at all. If you simply wanted to blast something away, that was easy enough. You just used Wind magic.

Installing magic of an appropriate physical force to operate the arm’s circuit, though, then deciding whether to grab onto the doll, was no ordinary feat.

It seemed ancient magic was much more advanced when it came to manipulating objects, so they were making use of that technology.

“There are two buttons, right? The first button moves the arm right and left, and you decide with the second button to either move it toward you or away from you. Then, when you let go of the first button, the arm stops. When you let go of the second button, the arm goes straight down.”

“Well! You sound like you’ve seen this before, Miss Azusa!”

I absolutely have.

This was entirely unrelated, but in some manga I’d read in my previous life, claw machines appeared in a whole lot of date scenes—why was that? Did people really play them a lot on dates?

Even if I got a stuffed animal on a date, I wouldn’t know what to do with it.

Especially if we broke up. Then, anything I got stuck with would just be a painful reminder. Some places had candy for prizes instead.

Well...whatever, let's just forget about my past life for now...

Okay, so I knew how to operate the machine, but I didn't see the arm in question. It was just a guess, but I figured it folded up into the ceiling when it wasn't in operation.

"It starts working when you insert a coin! Please insert one hundred koinne for one go. You can have six chances if you insert five hundred koinne."

So detailed...

I inserted one hundred koinne into the coin slot.

Just as I imagined, the arm appeared from above—but it was different from what I'd imagined.

This wasn't an arm. It was a fork. A fork with three tines!

Oh yeah, Pondeli had called it the Fork Doll Catcher, hadn't she...?

Whatever... Okay, time to move the fork...

I positioned the fork above a slime (doll).

The trident dropped, impaling it!

Yikes!

"This is not a good way to catch things! Plus, if it's stabbing the prizes, it'll be easy to beat!"

With the slime (doll) still stuck on its prongs, the fork retracted, brought the doll to the drop slot— —and another machine appeared and knocked the doll off the fork.

"That was ruthless!"

My slime (doll) appeared in the prize drop.

It had three holes where the fork had impaled it... Some of the stuffing was sticking out... Poor thing...

"You got it in one try! What incredible skill!" Pondeli was applauding me.

“Wait, wait, wait! This is really messed up! Make it grab the prizes with a softer touch!”

“I kept actual combat in mind and settled on a fork. You stick your quarry, and it is very hard to get it off once it’s stuck.”

“So anyone can win. You’re not going to make any money if everyone gets it on their first try.”

“Oh, you’re right... All our prizes will get claimed, and we will fall into the red...”

It sounded like she’d stopped thinking about this right before taking profit into consideration.

Flatorte and Halkara tried it afterward, and they easily got their dolls since the fork securely stabbed them.

“I’m glad to get a stuffed doll, but the holes are putting a bit of a damper on my excitement...”

Halkara’s opinion spoke for me.

“Ooh... This game needs tuning... To think my centerpiece would have a hitch like this...”

Pondeli’s arcade might have hit a few snags before even opening. Better to catch them now than later, though.

“But we do still have our ace in the hole!”

Now that she mentioned it, Pondeli had said *one of the most popular* when she was talking about the claw machine.

That basically meant there was another game that could compete with it.



“Please don’t tell me we’re hitting slimes instead of moles this time.”

“No need to worry about that! The concept of this game is completely different and made entirely possible by our new magical technology! It is extremely fun!”

If she was praising it that much, I figured I might as well take a look.

“Here it is!” Pondeli smacked a table.

In its center were two exquisite-looking dolls.

“We call this **Battle Dolls!**”

Oh, this one was going to be like a fighting game.

Pondeli started explaining Battle Dolls.

“The person playing this game moves the lever on the table in front of them. It is connected to magic that lets the doll operate on its own, so the figure on the table will then move. Whoever depletes the other’s life gauge first is the winner.”

So it was a fighting game. Very clearly a fighting game.

“Additionally, you can play on your own, but there is an operating lever on the opposite side. If you want to play against someone else, you can.”

So you *can* fight an opponent.

This really was interesting. Games that let you move and fight with actual, physical dolls didn’t exist in the arcades in my past life.

Not only that, but the ancient magic of the Thursa Thursa Kingdom was exceptionally good at controlling objects. After all, Muu practically lived her life by manipulating her doll-like body, as it were. Was it possible for the dolls in this game to move as well as real people?

“I’ll give it a try.”

My assumptions were right. The dolls danced smoothly and fluidly over the field, and I could activate moves by inputting commands.

Yeah, this was a lot of fun, actually. Way better than watching a fork impale a

stuffed animal.

“Mommy, Falfa wants to play this game!”

“I can hardly contain myself. Falfa, I challenge you!”

Starting with the first match between Falfa and Shalsha, the entire family went crazy over Battle Dolls.

“And there are so many characters you can pick! It’s so interesting. Even as a ghost watching over your shoulder, I can tell how fun it is.”

“Laika, you will battle with me, the great Flatorte!”

“I shall not lose! In a game or otherwise!”

It was a big hit. Such a big hit, in fact, that I had to wait forever for my turn.

“Oh, I’m so glad; what a relief... I think I’ll be able to open the arcade thanks to this.”

Pondeli had her hand placed on her chest. She must have been relieved since she was essentially the manager here.

“This is a good game. You could probably rake in more money with more tables.”

“Indeed. Each table is incredibly expensive, though...”

Arcades had their struggles in every world—but I really didn’t want to hear about them now.

After several rounds, my turn finally came up.

“Now that I’m here, I kind of want to try out the story mode.”

Words floated above the table where the dolls stood. *Hey, this is like some kind of AR show.*

STORY

Once upon a time, there lived an elderly baron and baroness.

One day, the baroness went to the river and saw a big apple bobbing up and down, as it flowed with the stream.

This story was sounding a lot like *Momotaro*... It was taking too long, so I

pressed the button to skip ahead a bit.

...And so the Apple Baron, now grown, ended up arguing with the viscount from the neighboring land.

It was then that they decided to battle.

The story was sloppy, but it didn't matter. The first battle was against the viscount. The viscount doll turned to face my Apple Baron. *Ready, fight!*

I started to rapidly *taptaptap, taptap, tatatatap* the button.

The Apple Baron produced a spell of bright-red flames. Okay, so that's a special technique.

"Wow! Lady Azusa, you are so skilled! I had no idea you could use such a technique!"

"You even play games at a pro level, Mistress!"

The audience behind me was getting riled up, too.

I tried commands that I thought might create a special move, and they usually did.

I definitely wasn't a gamer, but it wasn't like I'd never played a fighting game before. I could figure out the controls mostly by instinct.

I defeated the first enemy, the viscount; then the second, an alcoholic hunter who got into an argument with me at the tavern; and then the third, a swordsman who picked a fight with me on the street corner.

All these altercations started with verbal arguments—couldn't they do something about that? It might be realistic for someone with a chip on their shoulder, but what about fighting for what's right?

Narrative critiques like that aside—

I crushed the enemies one after the other and progressed through the story.

Now that fighting games had been introduced to the world, did that mean I had an unfair advantage here thanks to my experiences?

The day they call me Azusa, Pro Gamer, might not be far off. Heh-heh-heh...

—Then something else suddenly popped up on the screen.

A new player has joined the fray. Do you accept this challenge?

YES

NO

Oh, I guess that meant a new player was entering. I would gladly take them on.

My opponent was using a female martial-artist character. Just what I was hoping for.

“Don’t lose, Apple Baron!”

But—things were starting to go a little sideways.

The Apple Baron’s challenger, the martial artist, used a low kick to knock him into the air.

Then, while he was still airborne, she used another low kick to send him back up again.

“Hey, wait! I’m getting juggled! That’s not fair!”

The Apple Baron couldn’t do anything against those low kicks and lost.

“Geez... It’s amazing you discovered that move, but at least make it fair. Who is that? Pondeli?”

Pondeli was standing right beside me, though. “I can’t have this. I need to improve the game balance...”

At least she was actually planning on adjusting that.

I assumed the culprit must be someone in the family, but everyone was standing near me.

“You still have a long ways to go, Miss Azusa.” My opponent stood up from across the table.

Fighsly.

A professional martial artist! Hey, she even stunlocked people in real tournaments, too!

“Miss Fighsly, I know this is a game, but I can’t say I approve of using these

methods to win... I am not pleased with this at all.” Ever serious, Laika offered some candid advice. And she was right. That was mean.

“I understand. Then I will seal away the low-kick move next time. And yes, I would like a rematch with you, Miss Azusa. What do you say?” Fighsly gave an intrepid smile.

“I have no problem with that. Let’s get to it.”

Time to win back my pride!

—We played game after game, but I lost every time...

...and several of those times, I didn’t even do any damage...

She was on another level...

“Fighsly, you’re way too good at this game...”

“Yes. This is all I’ve been doing, after all.”

Fighsly puffed out her chest with the pride of a martial artist.

“I can tell that, one day, there will be tournaments using these fighting games with prize money on the line. I plan on earning all that tournament money.”

E-sports!

“And when that day comes, I will not have to fight using my body, which I greatly appreciate. No pain! I hope it comes soon!”

“Your motives have never been very becoming of a martial artist!”

Afterward, we heard that the games at the arcade underwent fine-tuning with Fighsly’s input, and the balance changed for the better.

As long as the ancient magic wasn’t being used for dangerous purposes, I had no complaints.

A GOD AND A SPIRIT RECONCILE

A little while ago, an establishment popped up in Flatta—a temple to the pine spirit, Misjantie.

It wasn't the main temple, of course. It was more like a branch.

A signboard detailing the history of the foundation sat in front of the building

Misjantie Temple

***House in the Highlands Branch
Deity: Misjantie,
Pine Spirit***

History

The Great Pine Spirit Misjantie, enshrined in the village of Tazine, offered a pine sapling to the Witch of the Highlands, and this sapling grew into a great tree just three days after being planted. This shrine commemorates that event and enshrines the Great Pine Spirit Misjantie.

Available for weddings, prayers for romance, and marriage counseling.

(Free consultation)

—That was what it said...

To put it bluntly, there were all sorts of factual errors.

It claimed the pine sapling had been offered to me, but Misjantie just gave it to me at the end of Falfa and Shalsha's sister wedding as a little wedding favor... There'd been nothing sacred about it.

It was true that once I'd planted it, it had grown into a massive pine tree in just days. You could see it for miles, so it was like a landmark for the house in the highlands.

I could understand the urge to make a temple based on those factors alone, but the spirit in question had basically dedicated the place to herself. Plus, she was so casual, I couldn't really bring myself to put my faith in her...

I passed by the Misjantie Temple and all its shady history.

She had used the growth of the pine tree to build a branch temple in Flatta and spread her faith.

To be more precise, she was trying to make money by holding weddings for people. The Misjantie Temple was not very well-off financially.

At the moment, some villagers were visiting.

"I wonder what they get out of it... I guess Misjantie herself does show up every once in a while, though..."

"Something about that does not seem to sit well with you, Lady Azusa," Laika pointed out. She had come with me on a shopping trip.

"I was just thinking about the nerve she has... This ability to see spirits and gods is a problem. It just makes it harder to believe in them..."

I knew spirits and gods had values that weren't much different from humans, so I found it really hard to muster up the will to venerate them. Not that I'd been leading a god-fearing life before I met them.

"I think it's nice to get along so well with some of the deities and spirits."

"I see. You're a good kid, Laika~"

For some reason, Laika's face went red. "You are terribly strong, and worshipping you seems a matter of course. Yet you are so easy to get along with... You treat me like family, like your real younger sister..."

“Oh, come on! I’m just a witch! I’ve just been alive for three hundred years! I’m not worship material!”

No matter how casual the spirits and gods turned out to be, being compared with them was weird. They were most definitely greater than me.

“How noble you are, Lady Azusa, to be so humble... How wonderful... I still have much to learn from you...”

“Why are you complimenting me so much today...? Is there something you want me to buy you...? You’re pretty humble yourself, right?”

“Well, I initially challenged you to a fight because I believed I was the strongest in the province... I was entirely conceited...”

Oh yeah—that happened so long ago. I’d been shocked at the time, but it was a good memory now.

“I intend to continue improving myself one step at a time so that I may be like you...Lady Azusa.”

It was a little over the top, and maybe I should have been embarrassed about it.

Actually, I had a feeling that Laika was already better than me at being ladylike...

“Ah, ahem... However, it is true that you may be excessively humble, Lady Azusa. You have never spoken of your heroic deeds of the past three hundred years,” Laika said with an earnest look. I guess she had an earnest personality, though, so that was a given.

“That’s just because I don’t have any...”

It had only been a few years since I found out I was ridiculously strong.

For three hundred years, I thought all that made me special was my immortality. I never contended with stronger enemies, and they never came after me.

Without any heroics, there were no feats and no stories spreading news of them.

“I am certain you must have overcome something incredible in the past, because this is you we are talking about, Lady Azusa. I will find out what that is someday!”

Laika was determined to get this out of me.

“I appreciate the enthusiasm, but you really can’t be disappointed over this, okay?”

—Then I heard a familiar style of speech.

“C’mon, man, stop! Why are you building this?!”

It was Misjantie, the pine spirit.

The local temple was nothing more than a small branch, but it was still her place of worship. It wasn’t odd to find her here. I wondered what was happening.

Laika and I entered Flatta’s Misjantie Temple and found a crowd of people building something a little ways in.

Misjantie stood beside them. “Cut it out, man! You’re gonna make it all cramped!”

Despite that, it seemed as though she had made herself invisible and inaudible to the regular person, so the construction workers didn’t notice her.

I stood at a distance and waved Misjantie over.

If I called to her from any closer, the workers would wonder why I was talking to the air. I had to take her where they couldn’t hear me.

“Oh! Azusa! This is no good, man. Ever since we established the Flatta branch, we’ve been in a real crisis.”

“It hasn’t been very long since you opened at all... What happened?”

“As far as I can tell,” said Laika, “it seems as though they’re building something. Is it not a good thing to have a new temple?”

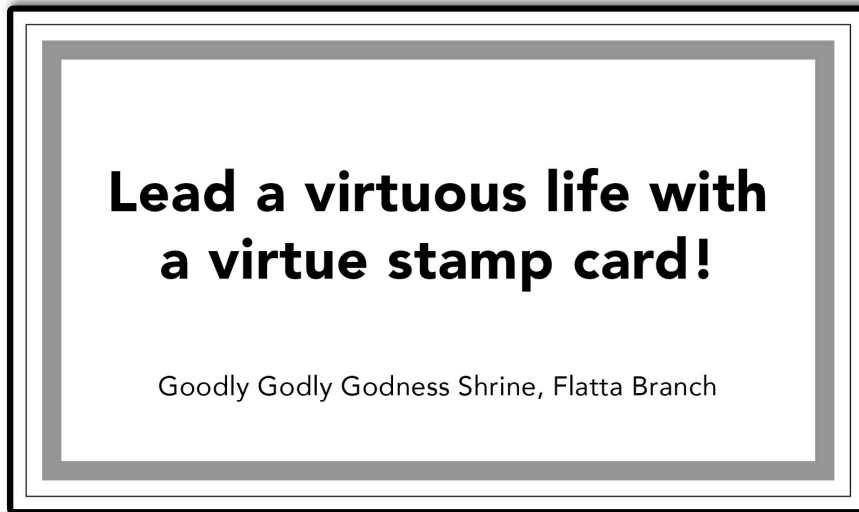
Laika was watching the construction.

“I thought so at first, too, man... But I recently realized someone tricked me...”

Tricked—that didn't sound good.

"Just look at that sign over there, man!"

As she said, there was a sign in front of the construction site—



That goddess was building a shrine here, too?!

I didn't think she'd find her way to Flatta... Her faith sure was spreading strong...

"I was just about to start pulling in wedding profits from Flatta, and now they're muscling in on my space... This is a crisis of faith, man..."

Misjantie was at her wits' end.

I guess even objects of worship have their fights, too.

This reminded me of something in Japan—the little auxiliary and subordinate shrines to related gods in the main shrine. Sometimes, either beside or behind the central shrine, there were smaller spots that worshipped the gods Inari or Benten.

Temples weren't all that different, either. It wasn't unusual to have halls dedicated to Benten or Jizou beside the main hall, where the principal deity was worshipped.

There could be a whole line of beneficial deities in the same polytheistic space.

"Misjantie, this space still celebrates you. Why not just let her have a little part of the land for a bit? Show her how profound you can be."

I patted Misjantie on the shoulder.

“The goddess’s worshippers might even want to hold their weddings in your areas, too. Let’s think about this positively.”

“C’mon, Azusa. Look how big her building is...”

The goddess in question’s shrine was decisively bigger.

If her shrine was the dream home built after retirement, then Misjantie’s temple was a prefab hut.

“Wow, you’re clearly losing...”

“She’ll take over the whole place at this rate, man... She came after *me*. She’s trying to take *my* worshippers away... She’s a goddess; why does she have to be so petty...?”

This was their difference in popularity... The world of gods and spirits was tougher than I thought...

“Oh, Miss Misjantie, there is hope.”

Hey, Laika was going in to support her.

“The Misjantie Temple is still right at the entrance, and Goodly Godly Godness’s shrine is facing sideways.”

Laika set about comforting her in the kindly girl’s usual pragmatism. She was an exemplary apprentice, of course.

“Hey, you’re right. Her shrine is facing ninety degrees to the right from the entrance... If you come in from the front, then all you can see is the back of the left side of my temple, man...”

“In essence, you are the primary deity here, and Goodly Godly Godness is the subordinate. That is how it works based on the layout. Those who come here to pray will surely understand that as well.”

“Thanks, dragon lady! I’ll be sure to throw you a fancy wedding, man!”
Misjantie gripped Laika’s hand.

“Oh... I haven’t...really thought about getting married...”

“You’re pretty enough to get whoever you want, man! If you’re ever interested, just lemme know!”

“No, I truly haven’t thought about it... My elder sister just got married a little while ago...” Laika seemed to be having a tough time of it.

I wasn’t really sure what a marriageable age for dragons was, but judging by Laika’s looks, I had a feeling she still had some time.

“I’ll find you a good dragon, man! I’m thinking about starting a matchmaking service! No annual fees if you join now!”

This was getting more and more corporate!

“I promise to never mess up when I handpick partners! I based the name on the Misjantie Temple to call it MisWeds!”

That made it sound like the wedding was a mistake!

“Please stop! I have never thought about getting married! I am still too immature, so weddings are not going to happen until the far future!”

Laika’s face was red as she stubbornly objected. It was a very Laika-like attitude, and she was thoroughly embarrassed.

“Awwwww, look, guys aren’t just immature; they’re like eternal kids, man. You don’t have to worry about that at all!”

This spirit was just saying whatever she wanted because regular people couldn’t see her.

“R-regardless, I have no intention of doing so!”

A bit of fire came out of Laika’s mouth.

The pine spirit’s “favor” was unwelcome.

“Misjantie, stop. You’re just meddling at this point.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to bother you, man... I was just so happy you reminded me my temple was the main one. I didn’t...”

Then the construction workers started moving.

“Next, we have to knock down this fence here.”

“Yeah, this’ll be Goodly Godly Godness’s main entrance.”

“Let’s use flagstone for the path.”

“We’ll have to make the shrine gate after that.”

They tore down the fence that was right in front of the goddess’s shrine and started putting in a board that read GOODLY GODLY GODNESS SHRINE, FLATTA BRANCH, ENTRANCE AND GATE CONSTRUCTION SITE.

They were trying to make a new entrance! The goddess was going to get an entrance that went right to her shrine’s front door!

“She’s seriously gonna take the main spot, man! This is unbelievable!”

“Oh dear... I suppose things like this do happen...”

Laika knew there wasn’t anything she could say to cheer Misjantie up.

“And she’s making a gate, too... I don’t have any gates at all, man... I’m done for... Next time people visit, they’re gonna think she’s the main shrine and I’m just something fun on the side...”

This time, Misjantie sunk to the floor in dejection.

It was weird to describe something in this world with a Buddhist phrase, but—All things must pass.

“Don’t worry about it, Misjantie,” I said.

“That’s something you say when you haven’t fixed anything, man...”

There was nothing we *could* do, though.

“But don’t you think it strange, Lady Azusa?” Laika was entirely calm and composed. I was so proud of my little sister. “A human must nominally have the property rights to this Misjantie Temple branch. Even if Goodly Godly Goodness is popular, whoever has those rights would never allow another place of worship to be built without permission...”

“Now that you mention it... Believers of a different god just breaking down your fences and throwing up a building is basically an act of aggression. It’s illegal anyway. Do you know anything about all this, Misjantie?”

“The temple here does have an administrator, yeah. He’s not from Flatta, but he is a priest who’s in charge of all the Misjantie Temples in this province.”

“Then he wouldn’t just sell the land to the patrons of another god—”

Then, an old man wearing priestlike robes passed by us, carrying a leather sack that looked like it was stuffed full of money.

“Phew~! Guess the Misjantie Temple will be able to stay open for a while yet. Selling off more than half the land was a good idea. That’s a relief.”

The priest sold the land in a managerial crisis!

The smiling priest walked away. The sale had probably been necessary to keep things running, but the spirit he worshipped was right here...

Misjantie finally toppled over and hit the floor face-first. It looked like it was too painful to keep herself up anymore.

“I lost... I can only really offer blessings to weddings and pine trees... She’s an almighty being who can offer blessings for all kinds of stuff... This is a losing battle, man...”

“I don’t think I can cheer you up, but the best defense might be a good offense. Why don’t you come on over to my house and have some tea?”

That was all I could do for her.

“Oh, what a kind thing to do! I’ll add a stamp to your virtue stamp card!”

I heard another familiar voice.

Goodly Godly Godness stood beside us.

“Oh! Goddess!”

This was the goddess who reincarnated me, who came to this world after being demoted, and was now operating under a ridiculous name.

“I started getting more followers in this province, so I ended up building a shrine here in Flatta~! Luckily, I found someone worried about keeping a spirit’s temple running, so I bought the land! I believe I’ll be able to have a lovely shrine built here.”

Yep, that was definitely land from Misjantie’s temple.

“I’m so happy I could help someone in need, too~! I’m racking up virtue~!”

“Goddess! That’s not a good thing to say right now!”

It sounded like she was trying to cause trouble!

Misjantie, still lying on the ground, looked up at the goddess.

This was the worst time they could have met. If a fight broke out between a god and a spirit, it would be a mess.

Not only that, but I knew both of them...

I'd have to be really careful if two of my acquaintances ended up not getting along...

Someone I was on good terms with in my past life always used to say things to me like, *"So-and-so sure gets way too into things, huh?"* and I never knew how to answer.

"So-and-so" was actually a close friend of mine, but I could never bring it up...

Boy, that was rough. My stomach hurt just thinking about it.

But at least that was all kept secret.

These two were standing right in front of each other, which added a whole new dimension to this problem.

"Uh, Goodly Godly Godness?" Misjantie said neutrally.

"Yes, what is it, miss pine spirit?"

Please keep this peaceful! Peaceful!

"...When your believers want to hold a wedding, please use my branch, man."

She went straight for an economic partnership!

"Understood~! ♪ I hope we have a happy relationship as neighbors~! ♪"

"Yeah. I'd also be happy if we could plan joint festivals to get our followers mingling, man."

Very clever—now she was trying to fold the goddess's followers into her own.

"If you could, would you tell your faithful that they can get virtue for having weddings in my temple, man?"

This spirit had no pride—actually, that was big relief.

“Hmm, I see. I might be able to declare that throwing a wonderful wedding counts as a virtuous act toward the stamp card.”

“I’ll take it, man! And if you can, I’d be super happy if you could put a little temple for Misjantie on the grounds of your other shrines...”

She was more brazen than I thought! She was the kind to use every tool she had.

“Very well. I will look into that. I want everyone to get along in joy and good health.”

“Yes, thank you! And Godly Godness, you’re gorgeous, man! I wish I could be like you!”

If you’re going to suck up, that’s a really cliché way to go about it.

“Thank you so much~! That makes me happy~!”

The goddess did not seem terribly dissatisfied—but it was hard to tell because she was wearing her usual smile.

“I’m praying for you to be as everlasting as the pines, man!”

Misjantie and the goddess exchanged a firm handshake.

“I see the problem has been resolved, Lady Azusa,” Laika commented once it was all over. I agreed.

“Looks like it... I’m relieved it didn’t come to them shutting each other down. Okay, let’s get back to shopping.”

We had made one hell of a detour—and we still had to get ingredients for dinner.

“Oh, wait, Azusa, wait. I’ll give you a stamp.” The goddess stopped me.

“Uh...did I bring my card? Oh yeah, it’s still in my wallet.”

I got a stamp.

“So you really are giving those out.”

“I am still a god, so I am working hard to ensure everyone is happy. I might be twisted in some other ways, but I am straightforward when it comes to this!

Zing!”

Did she just say “zing” to herself?

“Let us meet when we both have the time—we can get lunch or tea or something. Or have a girls’ day out!”

“Sure, sure. Just come over whenever you feel like it.”

She was acting like she was my classmate or something.

She was being way too familiar with me for a goddess—but maybe that wasn’t so bad.

And that was how the land problem between the Misjantie Temple and the Goodly Godly Godness Shrine was settled without incident.

Misjantie was the *if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em* type, thankfully. If I were to relabel her noncommittal way of life, then I could say her worldview was flexible and she could roll with the punches. Misjantie was hardy and tough.

Plus, shrines were a good shot in the arm for our sleepy town of Flatta.

A BATTLE WITH A TRADITIONAL GOD

It was a week after we solved the shrine problem.

“Good mooorniiing, Azusa!”

When I woke up, I found the goddess a few inches away from my face.

“Gaaaaaaah! You’re too close! Give me some space—I almost didn’t know who you were at first!”

“My, my. Everyone will wake up if you keep yelling.”

The goddess really didn’t feel any guilt, did she…?

She was floating over my head, which was a thing goddesses could do, I guess.

“What do you want? You might be a goddess, but your entrances are too extreme…”

Not even Beelzebub or Pecora appeared right next to me like this.

“I’m having a bit of trouble, so I was wondering if you’d help me out~” Her expression said otherwise.

“Do gods have trouble? Even if they do, can’t you solve it yourself?”

She was the one who made me immortal and reincarnated me. She could probably do anything she wanted.

“Yes. I don’t mean to boast, but I can solve a considerable number of issues by myself. I have no need to rely on what humans call ‘online strategy guides.’”

But they don’t even have those here.

“However, there are some things that cannot be dealt with even using divine power. Now, what do you suppose that might be?”

“Why are you quizzing me?”

This couldn’t be anything too bad. Had she been winding up to talk about an

actual tragedy, I really wouldn't know how to react.

"Okay, time's up! You lose, Azusa."

Apparently, I had failed the pop quiz. I knew there wasn't a lot I could do about it, but it was still annoying...

"Okay. You're right; I lost. Now please go home."

"No, please ask what's troubling me. When the game says *I'm in trouble!* you don't say, *I see, that's too bad*. You must stick your nose into quests!"

She really likes games, huh?

I wasn't really sure, but that definitely sounded like a video game.

"I spent three hundred years living in the highlands because I wanted to avoid this kind of thing, but...fine, I guess there's no harm in just asking."

I doubted the goddess had many people she could talk to, so I suppose it was all right to hear her out.

"In a word, I...have...*dun dun dun*...a rival!"

That was vaguely menacing.

"A rival? You mean Misjantie?"

I remembered what had happened in Flatta a week ago.

"No, she would not be a rival for me. In a battle manga, she would lose to the big bad in the first round of the tournament to show how powerful the villain is."

The goddess displayed her dismissal by waving her right hand from side to side.

She wasn't wrong, but that was an extremely spiteful way of expressing it.

"Then who? I can't think of anyone."

By the way, the goddess had been floating above my bed this whole time. She was kinda like Rosalie.

"My rival is, in a word—tradition!"

The goddess sure liked saying *in a word*.

“Tradition? Ha-ha. I bet you introduced weird patterns into your shrine, and they started treating it like it was unearthly, right?”

Local civilization and culture decided what a building should look like.

For example, if someone put a building that looked like the Palace of Versailles or the Forbidden City in a Japanese farming village, people would think it was weird. On the other hand, if someone built a Japanese castle in another country, it wouldn't fit in at all.

Although if someone suddenly built a castle in a farming village period, it would be weird...

This goddess knew the civilizations and cultures of different worlds. Maybe she had incorporated some of that knowledge into her shrine and come up with something that didn't work in this world. Perhaps the locals found it uncanny.

I shared my hypothesis.

“Oh~! I see~ In a word, you're close~!”

“You just want to say *in a word* over and over again, don't you?!”

She was just so casual about everything. Flippant is what she was.

“You've lived in this world for three hundred years, right? Then you must be more knowledgeable about it than I am.”

“That depends... There's still plenty I don't know...”

I couldn't tell what she was about to say, so I gave myself some insurance.

“Azusa, do you know of the goddess Nintan?”

The goddess Nintan was a major deity worshipped in this country since ancient times.

“Yes, but only the basics.”

Flatta had been too small to have its own temple, but larger towns had temples representing the goddess Nintan. Whether she was the main deity was a separate question, but she was often enshrined somewhere in the temples.

There were many priests who served her, and large-scale festivals for her in the capital.

I knew enough to explain that, at least.

“I bet if I brought Shalsha over, she could give you a more in-depth description. Uhhh, she’s the god who supervises the years, right?”

In this country, people believed that the deity who governed the year would come again the following year. In Japan, they say the god of the new year came to bring good luck every New Year, so I guess that was similar.

“Yes, that’s right. The priests of the goddess Nintan also hold a considerable power.”

“Did they do something to you?”

“They proposed to the royal court that they might impose limits on the popular gods who are superseding their stations~”

She spoke so calmly and casually, but what she was talking about was pretty serious. My drowsiness vanished.

“Does that mean they’re going to ban people from worshipping you?”

“Yes. It doesn’t seem like they’re going to be destroying all my shrines, but they told me my virtue stamp card was a ‘joke’ and thus forbidden.”

Honestly, I thought they were a joke, too.

“I won’t be able to distribute them anymore at this rate!”

“That’s not so bad, is it?”

“No, no, no! They can’t do this! My stamp cards are a wonderful system where virtue naturally accumulates to make a richer society!”

The goddess grabbed both my shoulders and started shaking me.

“We must protect them at all costs! We must not yield to the suppressive forces of tradition! It is cowardly for a veteran to attack a newcomer! The elderly cause all sorts of problems, and this is yet another one on the pile!”

I thought *suppression* was a strong word, but this might be similar to senior office workers tormenting a new member of the team.

Priests of the older gods probably had a lot of authority. Tradition had a lot of strength.

“Then, I had an idea. I am going to meet Nintan directly and earn her permission! We’re both deities, so I’m sure she’d understand!”

She was all fired up now.

“We solved a problem peacefully with Misjantie just last week! If I can get Nintan to send an oracle to her priests to stop the suppression, this should all blow over without incident!”

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea. Good luck.”

It was reasonable to go straight to the top during negotiations. It was much more effective than persuading one or two of her underlings.

“Right? It’s a great strategy, if I do say so myself! Don’t you think?”

Should a god be so desperate for a human’s approval?

“Yes... I think it’s good for a breakthrough.”

“Then come with me, Azusa.”

“...Huh?”

Things were starting to get weird.

“Did you not hear me? I’m going to meet the goddess Nintan to tell her not to ban my virtue stamp card system, and I want you to come along, Azusa.”

“No! I didn’t say *Huh?* because I didn’t hear you. I said it because I don’t get why you’re asking me to go through all that trouble!”

This was so not my problem. Why would I want to go?

Not to mention, this other goddess was pretty frightening.

I mean, I hadn’t met her, obviously. I was judging by her reputation.

“The goddess Nintan is really grouchy, and there are a lot of myths where she turns humans who were rude to her into frogs! I’m not going!”

There were a surprising number of stories about Nintan that had to do with frogs, probably because they showed up in spring and were a symbol of a new year.

I even heard there were frog statues in her temples.

“Oh, we’ll manage~ You’re so negative!”

The goddess pulled my arm.

Also, now that I knew there were at least a handful of goddesses in this world, I should probably have referred to her by her name (or just Godly Godness) instead of *the goddess*. Neither was very cute, though.

“Please settle divine problems among divinity! This is way too much for a human!”

“Look, you’re immortal and overpowered and leading a lovely harem life because of me, right? Please come with me~!”

“*Harem* is misleading! This isn’t a harem!”

We were family at most. Roommates. The house was not a special, gay dimension.

“And no matter how strong I get, we’re still talking about in comparison to regular humans, right? I can’t win against a god! What would happen if I pissed one off?! How are you going to help me when I get turned into a frog?!”

“Then I will take responsibility—”

Godly Godness forcefully pounded her chest.

Aw, and save me no matter what?

“—and keep you as a pet!”

“Turn me back into a human!”

I don’t want to spend my life as a frog.

“I will have flies for you to eat every day.”

Oh, then I might be able to eat Beelzebub when she’s a fly—wait, that wasn’t the issue here.

“I don’t want to eat flies. You’re a goddess! Please go on your own!”

“Awww, but the goddess seems so grouchy~! I might be traumatized forever if things get weird~” She pouted her lips and insisted.

“You can manage. It is true you’re new here, so just think of it as going to visit

one of your elder neighbors.”

“I feel like she’s going to be mean to me~ And I’ve made other gods angry in meetings sometimes.”

That was probably her problem.

Her refusal to take responsibility was turning out to be a real issue.

“Why not bring your other neighbor, Misjantie, along with you? I’m only a witch.”

“I feel like if I brought that spirit with me, the goddess would only get angrier and suppress me more.”

I’m sorry. That’s exactly what would happen.

“Come on, Azusa, let’s think of this another way! You’ll get to meet one of the goddesses who has ruled this world for a very long time! You’ll meet a legend! This sort of chance rarely comes around! Oh wow, what a score! Lucky!”

“Get to meet? Aren’t we the ones going to see her? We haven’t been invited or anything. I feel like there’s nothing but trouble ahead...”

This wasn’t going to be a short trip to help some people out.

I had my limits, too. I couldn’t agree without giving it serious consideration.

“I see. Very well.”

Hey, she finally gave up.

Godly Godness let go of my arm but then took out some kind of notebook and started writing.

“Then the Goddess stood by the Witch of the Highland’s pillow and bade her to accompany Her. The Witch refused, stating she had no good reason to get involved. I will put that in the Blasphemy chapter of the scripture I’m putting together.”

“Hey! That’s slander!”

“This is really only my diary~ The people who believe in me read it as a scripture, though~”

This goddess was threatening me...

It sounded like her scripture would be filled with half-truths.

“And so the Goddess punished her. Ever since then, the Witch’s estate has been infested with pill bugs. One in every three was actually a cave cricket.”

“Don’t *actually* threaten me! You’re a god. Don’t be so petty!”

“The Goddess punished her again. Mites like little red dots began swarming the Witch’s dining table. During mealtimes, spiders of considerable size would crawl across it as well. When she opened the window, a horsefly invariably flew in. Whenever she got dressed, a stink bug always found its way into her clothes.”

“What’s with the cavalcade of small inconveniences?!”

I guess I had to do it. Godly Godness *was* being harmed by this.

“Fine. But I am *only* coming with you, okay...?”

I finally gave in.

“Oh, I knew you’d say yes, Azusa! Yes! You’re the president! A gold medalist! An oil tycoon! Number one in the Oricon charts!”

Your flattery isn’t very effective if you use a bunch of concepts that don’t even exist here.

The goddess Nintan had been revered for a very long time, so she probably wasn’t a tyrant who would immediately turn someone into a frog if angered. She had to be a generous goddess.

Or so I wanted to believe...

I’ve met dragons, the demon king, spirits, ghosts, and all sorts of other beings, but Nintan was probably going to top everyone else in terms of sheer magnitude. (Godly Godness wasn’t a part of this world, strictly speaking, so I left her out.) Still, I wasn’t exactly sure if she was someone I could physically meet.

Where did I go to meet a god? It was one thing if she appeared before me on her own like Godly Godness, but I didn’t know any gods’ addresses.

“Then let’s plan to see the goddess Nintan in two weeks. I will do all I can to work out a strategy until then!” Godly Godness said breezily.

At this rate, it didn’t seem like there would be any problem meeting this other goddess.

Actually, I felt like Godly Godness would be more successful if she made a straightforward plea instead of playing politics...but she could do what she wanted. She was the one taking on the responsibility here anyway. I was just tagging along.

Maybe I could reread some of those myths and stock up on info about the goddess Nintan...



The day we were to meet the goddess Nintan came.

Laika flew me to the town of Nintania, which neighbored the capital. As you could probably guess by the name, it was the town of the goddess Nintan.

According to legend, Nintan came to live here after alighting upon this earth—although that was still just a story in myth.

The Grand Nintan Temple had been built in this region over a thousand years ago, and there were still many priests who served her.

“Lady Azusa, things have taken quite an unexpected turn...,” said Laika in her dragon form. I didn’t think it would be very nice of me to worry her by keeping things weirdly hush-hush, so I’d explained the situation beforehand.

“Sheesh, I know... It’s been a while since I got wrapped up in something like this...”

I couldn’t be too pessimistic and worry Laika.

“You are facing a god. If you defeat her, that would mean you are even greater than a god, Lady Azusa!”

Now she’s putting me on a pedestal!

“I’m not going to fight, okay? I probably can’t win anyway. All the systems of the world would go completely out of whack if a human defeated a god!”

“Lady Azusa, you have plenty of potential to overcome the divine. I may not be with you, but I am rooting for you!”

This was too much! Her expectations were too heavy!

Laika landed at the perfect spot, and I made my way toward Nintania.

The dragon was waving at me.

It hurts to be overly anxious, but it’s also not good to get your hopes up, either. Nothing is ever good in excess...

When I reached my destination, Godly Godness was already waiting for me and carrying a cloth bag. I wondered what she’d brought along with her.

“Now let us go. I’ve decided to be visible to everyone today.”

“Sure, feel free. Let me just repeat myself, though: I’m not doing anything.”

Godly Godness just walked on over to the Grand Nintan Temple.

It was a fancy place—the temple was surrounded by a garden with a massive pond in it.

It was kind of something like the Phoenix Hall of Byodo-in or Kinkaku-ji. Obviously, the style wasn’t Japanese—it was more of a western garden than anything.

I thought we’d be turned away at the gates, but no, we marched right in.

It looked like devout followers came from all over the country, so they never turned people away. Inside, there were even people crying, “I’m so glad I came at least once in my lifetime,” and “I finally completed my dream pilgrimage...”

I guess this was something long-lived gods had to their advantage.

The grand temple was filled with a dignified air; I could feel my heart growing purer by the moment.

At the far end of the temple, there was a bronze statue of the goddess Nintan.

She was in a unique pose with her hands held out in front of her chest, her palms facing outward. She looked like a sumo wrestler practicing flat-palmed blows. There was probably some significance to this posture, but it hadn’t been

mentioned in any of the myths.

If I were to pick out any particular characteristic about the goddess, it was how long her hair was. It practically reached the floor.

If anyone with hair like that existed in real life, I'm sure it would be tremendously annoying. They'd probably constantly be stepping on it and falling over. Public toilets would be way too dirty to use.

The faithful were absorbed in offering prayers beside the statue.

Some were wearing tattered clothes. They were probably training on some sort of pilgrimage.

"Azusa, take my hand, please." Godly Godness extended her hand to me, and I gripped it, still unsure why she'd offered it. "Now let's go in."

"Huh? In where?"

We were already inside the grand temple.

"Do not let go of my hand while we're in motion, okay? We are not pretending here; this is real," Godly Godness said, before starting to run straight at the bronze statue.

"We're going to crash into it!"

"It's fine~ Because...hmm, why was it again? It slipped my mind."

Wait, are we going to be okay?!

Just before we ran right into the statue, I closed my eyes!



The pain from the impact never came.

I slowly, cautiously opened my eyes...and I found myself in an odd space.

Magic circles (or something like them) floated all around me and beneath my feet, like a projection map.

It was hard to tell if there was a floor, but I didn't feel like I was either falling or floating.

"All right, here we are. You don't need to hold my hand anymore," Godly

Godness chirped, so I let go. Now that I thought about it, I realized she'd been with me this whole time.

"What on earth happened?"

"In a word, we entered the world of the gods~ This is the goddess Nintan's space."

That was definitely weird.

"Godly Godness, you may be a little rotten, but you are definitely a god."

"How rude of you, Azusa! At least call me fermented instead!"

That wasn't very different from *rotten*, though, was it...?

"And the goddess Nintan is the one right in front of us~" Godly Godness said nonchalantly.

I looked ahead, and a dignified goddess was standing there whose appearance practically screamed, *I'm a deity!*

Her hair was super long, and her ears were pointy, like an elf's, but even more so. They were pointier than Halkara's anyway.

The way she looked at us was terrifying. Maybe she needed more calcium...

Or maybe she was upset we'd barged in...

No, I shouldn't judge people on their looks. There was a chance she was incredibly nice and very easy to get along with!

"You're Godly Godness, that joke of a newcomer, aren't you?"

There was tremendous pressure behind her voice. She was the type to assert dominance right off the bat...

"Yes, that's me~! I came today because I wanted to get to know one of the older gods, and that's you, Nintan~"

Godly Godness was as lackadaisical as ever.

I bet, in some cases, her affable manner would help, but the character of the goddess Nintan was like water to her oil.

Still, Godly Godness had said she was going to come up with a plan, so I was

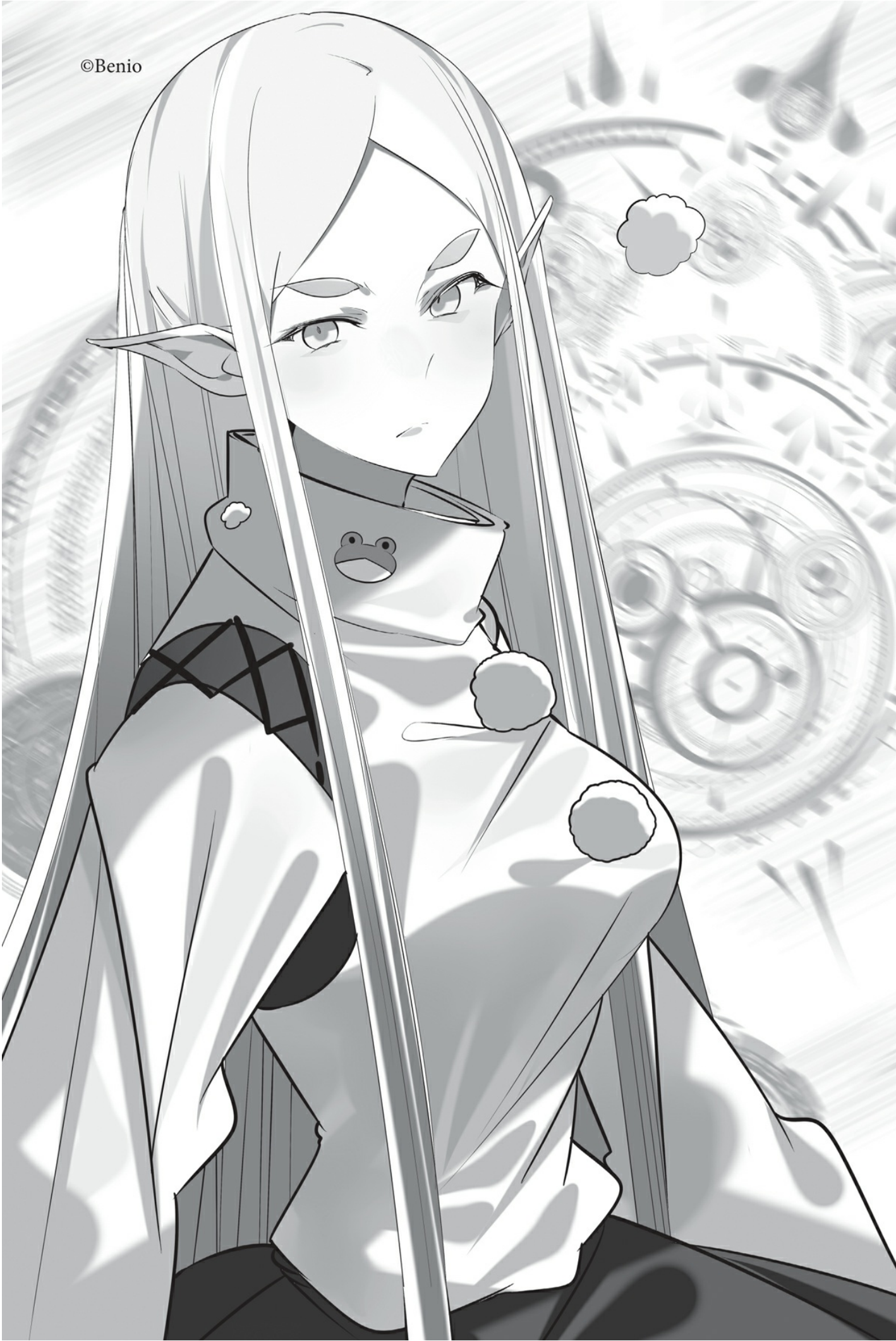
resting my hopes on that.

She immediately stuck her hand into the cloth bag she'd brought.

What did she have in there?

“Accordingly, I brought a souvenir: edible slimes. I hope you like them~”

She was going with the souvenir tactic?! Would that even work for gods?!



“When did you buy those?!”

“The lady named Halkara sells them near the factory. I bought some. See, just because we know each other doesn’t mean I should get them for free. In fact, I should be giving her money *because* we know each other. Paying full price is paying respect.”

“Oh yeah, she is selling them in town... And I wasn’t implying you didn’t have to go out of your way to get them!”

“No need to worry! I bought the nicest one for gifting! It’s filled with respect for the recipient!”

“No, thank you.” Nintan shot her down.

Figures... She didn’t seem like the type to say, *Oh gosh, thank you so much for the gift~!*

“Aw, don’t say that~ No other sweet has a texture like this! It’s delicious~” Godly Godness could take a beating...

“We do not like sweets. Take them home with you.”

Wow, she was blunt. Plan A was a bust.

“Heh-heh-heh. I thought you might say that.” Godly Godness grinned. It looked like she hadn’t put much hope into that plan. Good thing, because if that was her only strategy, I would have been ready to throw in the towel.

Godly Godness stuck her hand into the cloth bag again. “You may not be the sort for sweets, but I’m sure you’re a drinker! I brought the highest-quality alcohol; it’s called the Liquor of Gods! Let us drink the night away!”

She pulled out a bottle of booze! She was basically just trying to buy her off!

“No thank you.” Nintan turned her down again.

“What? But it’s so good! You’re missing out~”

“You are trying to tempt Us with things. We will not be so easily baited with your jests.”

“Oh no... My *Have Her Turn a Blind Eye by Using Bribes Strategy* failed...” Godly Godness seemed really upset by this.

“Are gods allowed to do this?!”

“Azusa, didn’t anyone ever teach you to treat others how you want to be treated?”

“*Sigh...* I heard that in my past life.”

“And I would be so happy to receive liquor! That’s why I thought this would work!”

“So what?!”

I almost wanted to take Nintan’s side now...

The goddess Nintan huffed. She was definitely a sadist.

“Goodly Godly Godness. We know your ulterior motives. You believed your religion was about to be suppressed, so you came to Us so that We might show you kindness, no?”

She had the whole picture. Anyone could figure it out.

“Oh, no~! I just wanted to get to know you better~ Do you really not want anything to dri—?”

“There are many gods in this world. We know this, and We have tolerated much.”

The goddess Nintan had cut Godly Godness off mid-sentence...

“That makes me happy~! Then does that mean you’ll give me a pass, too? Yay!”

This goddess was so positive... Optimism was a valuable asset in life, I thought.

“Silence, child!”

On the other hand, the goddess Nintan was pissed.

“What in heaven is your ‘virtue stamp card’?! It is not even a joke; it is an insult to jokes! There is not a single hint of divinity about you! A god must be more

emptyreal!”

—*real, real, real...*

The goddess Nintan’s voice echoed throughout the space.

I knew how she felt. She wouldn’t want to be put on the same level as someone who was just handing out loyalty cards.

After a rant like that, though, Godly Godness couldn’t stay quiet, either.

“Ooh... W-well, I suppose you could say it is a joke, yes... I was thinking it would be fine to bring more amusing elements into this world...”

“Don’t acknowledge it!”

If her followers knew it was a joke, they’d be shocked!

“Such pointless things do have value in existing, too, don’t they? No, actually, they don’t need any value. But are things without value wrong? I’m okay with being worthless. That’s why things like myself exist...”

I had a feeling she was saying something good, but it didn’t really resonate that well, probably because of how cowardly she was...

“What does it mean to be a god to you, Godly Godness? Do you think it some sort of joke? Or is it a passionate ambition? Tell Us openly!”

An actual sound argument came at us.

But this was also a chance for Godly Godness.

If she could pull on Nintan’s heartstrings, she might get her permission.

“.....Being a god?Hmmm..... A god, hmm.....”

“You’re not going to say anything?!”

All that talk about worth had given her a perfect opening! She was awful at debating!

“I just wanted to carry on in a relaxed and humble manner for a long time, all the while getting more people to do good things, even simple ones. Yes, my theme is to carry on humbly and for a long time. I want to be something that’s somewhat established in this world, like jute mallow, or nata de coco, or

yuzukoshō...”

“What are ‘nata de coco’ and ‘yuzukoshō’?”

I didn’t think nata de coco existed in this world. It was a food that looked like agar at first, but it had a chewy texture when you bit into it. Did jute mallow even exist, though?

“We have made no progress speaking with you. Enough. Leave. We will dispatch an oracle to my priests to suppress your teachings.”

Coming here actually made things worse.

“I understand. So to make it fair, why don’t we draw straws?”

“Yes, very we— You understand nothing!”

Godly Godness almost pulled this traditional goddess into a funny-man-straight-man routine. What an incredible thing to witness...

“We have told you to leave! Where did this talk of drawing straws come from?! Hop to it and leave, or We will turn you into a frog!”

“Was that pun intentional? It wasn’t very funny~”

“It was not a joke! We have no intention of making jokes! You truly must put an end to this!”

The calm and collected goddess Nintan was now furious and red in the face... Godly Godness’s sloppiness was seriously a thing of wonder.

Godly Godness grasped a bunch of thin, chopstick-like wooden sticks in her right hand and thrust them out toward Nintan. She’d also retrieved them from her bag. What *wasn’t* in there?

“We told you to le—”

“One of these sticks has a marking on it. If you pull that one, then please approve my teachings!”

I should probably learn from her aggression.

There were ten of those sticks, and so the chances of Nintan pulling the one with the mark were very low.

Godly Godness glanced in my direction and winked. I think that meant she had this.

“Now please draw one!”

“Wait. Do you truly only have one marked? Show Us all the sticks before We start.”

“Gulp.”

She just said “gulp” out loud...

Godly Godness let go, and the sticks fell.

All of them had some kind of marking on them. It was a complete fraud...

“Gods shouldn’t lie! That’s the one line you shouldn’t cross!”

I couldn’t keep my mouth shut anymore.

“See, I thought such a traditional technique might prove surprisingly useful~ She is a traditional god. There are plenty of tricks in myth that make you think, *No one would be fooled by that. It would be impossible to pull this off by the standards of modern literature~*”

Should a god be insulting myth?

“Godly Godness. You must leave. You are the vilest of all the popular gods that have risen in the past five hundred years. We will have a priest with political influence ban your teachings. We will have all the books with your doctrines in them burned. Shoo, shoo!”

We were losing ground to talk at all.

“Um, what are you going to do, goddess...? There probably isn’t much left, is there?”

“There’s no need to worry, Azusa. I still have a plan ready. There is still a way out of danger.”

I had a feeling that it was Godly Godness creating the peril all on her own, if anything, but if she had a plan, she should go for it.

Godly Godness stared hard at the goddess Nintan.

Hey, looks like she's suddenly serious. Maybe this was going to be our breakthrough.

Godly Godness then immediately fell to her knees—

—and pressed her forehead to the floor.

“I beg you to overlook my teachings! I promise there are hardly any dangerous elements to them!”

It was the waterworks strategy!

There was nothing wrong with her plan, but it was cheap.

Godly Godness was starting to look more and more like Halkara, what with that lackadaisical attitude and unwarranted optimism...

“We will be sure to suppress them completely so that not a single record remains of you in one hundred years.”

I thought our goddess couldn't possibly make her case even worse, but I was wrong!

There was nothing we could do.

Godly Godness had tried every stratagem, and they'd all ended in failure. It would be impossible to ask for Nintan's good offices at this point.

“This was unavoidable. I will use my last resort, then.”

Godly Godness slowly rose from the floor. To be honest, I didn't have high hopes.

“We have told you to leave... Perhaps We shall inflict your believers with a plague.”

Nintan was going after her flock now...

“Goddess Nintan, let us decide which god is correct through strength.”

Godly Godness produced a long, thin sword from the cloth bag. Was it connected to hammerspace or something?

I was convinced the goddess Nintan would refuse this, too—but her lips twisted into a smile.

“How funny. We will obliterate both the god who insults Us and *her attendant.*”

Nintan produced a blade that was more old-fashioned and thicker.

Wait, hold on, that doesn't sound good!

“Er, I’m just tagging along, okay?! I’m just an acquaintance of this joke of a god! Please don’t associate me with her, okay?! Please don’t obliterate me!”

I didn’t want to get mixed up in this! No thank you!

“Oh, Azusa, you’re so mean! Are you putting the responsibility on me?!”

“*You’re* the one shifting responsibility to *me*! I’m not safe at all here! A quick nick with that stick could seriously take me out!”

“Quick nick with a stick... Thirty-seven points for that joke.”

“I don’t have time to make jokes!”

I knew I shouldn't have come along! I've never witnessed a situation that was literally all pain, no gain like this!

“Hmm, We suppose your attendant matters not. Goodly Godly Godness, you will regret taking up arms to test Us.”

“Jokes on you, I already regret it~! So that won’t work~!”

What are you, five?! And you regret it?!?!

“Azusa, I will protect you.” Godly Godness stood in front of me.

“...I *want* to say thanks, but at this point, you owe it to me to keep me safe.”

She wasn’t a random stranger saving me from a pack of thugs. *You caused this whole thing, after all.*

“You will gaze upon Our traditional—”

“Prepare yourself!”

Godly Godness rushed Nintan just as she was about to speak.

Guess her stance was *might makes right*.

“Such impudence! You will fall by Our blade!”

The goddess Nintan's word choice was distinctly old-fashioned. She was definitely a traditional god.

The way the two moved when they fought, though, was beyond all imagination.

I could hardly even follow them with my eyes...

They traded blows with tremendous physical power, striking and parrying.

If I was just barely following them with my stats, a god's power was seriously nothing to sneeze at.

"So this is a battle between gods... Finally, something that isn't a joke. Godly Godness is amazing, too..."

Fshing! Kaklang!

Every time their swords connected, I could hear the clash of metal. Neither was giving ground in the slightest. Despite the danger, I was enraptured by this dance of violence.

This was the peak of any decisive battle.

"You are rather skilled in the art of combat. You would be a good match for the gods of war in this world."

"Of course I would~ I am high-ranking even among gods~"

The goddess Nintan's expression clouded over slightly with displeasure, but the warrior gods did not stop exchanging blows. "What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. I was originally a god who managed several worlds. On the other hand, you are just one of the gods managing a specific world. In a way, you could say I'm an executive from headquarters, while you are a regional branch manager of sorts."

That was a horribly mean comparison, but she wasn't wrong.

Common sense dictated Godly Godness should be higher on the ladder, given that she'd had influence over multiple worlds.

"However...I made a mistake at work and ended up falling to this world...so I'll accept some reasonable restraints..."

Don't give her information that puts you at a disadvantage!

"But I think I can beat you, Nintan. I'm only using fifty...sixty...eighty percent of my power."

That's still a lot! She'll reach full throttle in no time!

"Is that so...? If what you say is true, then We understand why you are so skilled."

Nintan was looking tired. From what I could tell, Godly Godness was overpowering her.

It was happening slowly, but Nintan was increasingly on the defensive.

"Let's go! Let me make you admit defeat!"

Even if their discussion had gotten them nowhere, it seemed like this might settle the matter.

"Now let us finish this!" Godly Godness rushed at Nintan.

But at that moment—I thought I saw the goddess Nintan smile.

The smile of a sadist.

Then, just like the statue, she held her hands out, palms forward, like a sumo wrestler about to make an open-palm strike.

"You child! You've left yourself defenseless! Become a frog!"

From her hands, the goddess Nintan released a bluish-white light, which collided with Godly Godness— —and an instant later, I saw a giant frog about three feet tall sitting in her place.

"Oh no! I've been turned into a frog!" Godly Godness yelled.

It sounded like she could talk. And she was huge. It gave me the creeps.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! This is Our secret! You will live on as a frog and subsist on flies!"

What a wicked move... A life eating flies sounded awful...

“But perhaps We should torment you a little more.”

The goddess Nintan readied her blade. *Is she really attacking a frog? Isn't that animal abuse?*

Nintan slowly advanced on the amphibian.

“Waaah! I want to run, but I cannot jump very well!”

Godly Godness could only hop straight up. She would need more practice to master leapfrog.

“We will punish you for testing a god.”

In the meantime, the distance between Nintan and Godly Godness was closing.

I couldn't let this happen. I rushed forward and stood in front of the frog.

“You shouldn't bully someone weaker than you!”

I shouted in the face of the goddess Nintan.

Attacking an unarmed frog was an act unbecoming of the divine. Nintan wasn't an evil deity, so she had no reason to do such a thing.



“Godly Godness’s attendant, hmm? You are the world’s strongest human, the Witch of the Highlands, are you not?”

Even a god knew who I was. I guess she would, since it was her job to manage this world.

“You may be the strongest among humans, but you cannot defeat a god, much less one with such history, faith, and experience. Move.”

“No.”

“If you comply now, then We shall forgive you, merely infesting your home with cockroaches.”

That was still pretty harsh...

Is using bugs as divine punishment “in” right now? Godly Godness was talking about pill bugs, too.

“It’s all right, Azusa. They eat cockroaches in some parts of the world!”

“Frog goddess, was that supposed to make me feel better...?”

“Plus, the roaches you find in houses are only one subset of the entire cockroach family! Most of them live in the woods and mountains, so they’re not filthy at all!”

“No more fun cockroach facts, please!”

Please don’t joke around in a stressful situation like this. My whole body felt tense.

“I know Godly Godness has a lot of problems. She’s like a whole dollar store full of issues. But...” I stretched out my arms to block the way. “Now that she’s a defenseless frog, I will protect her. I can’t stand by and watch her die.”

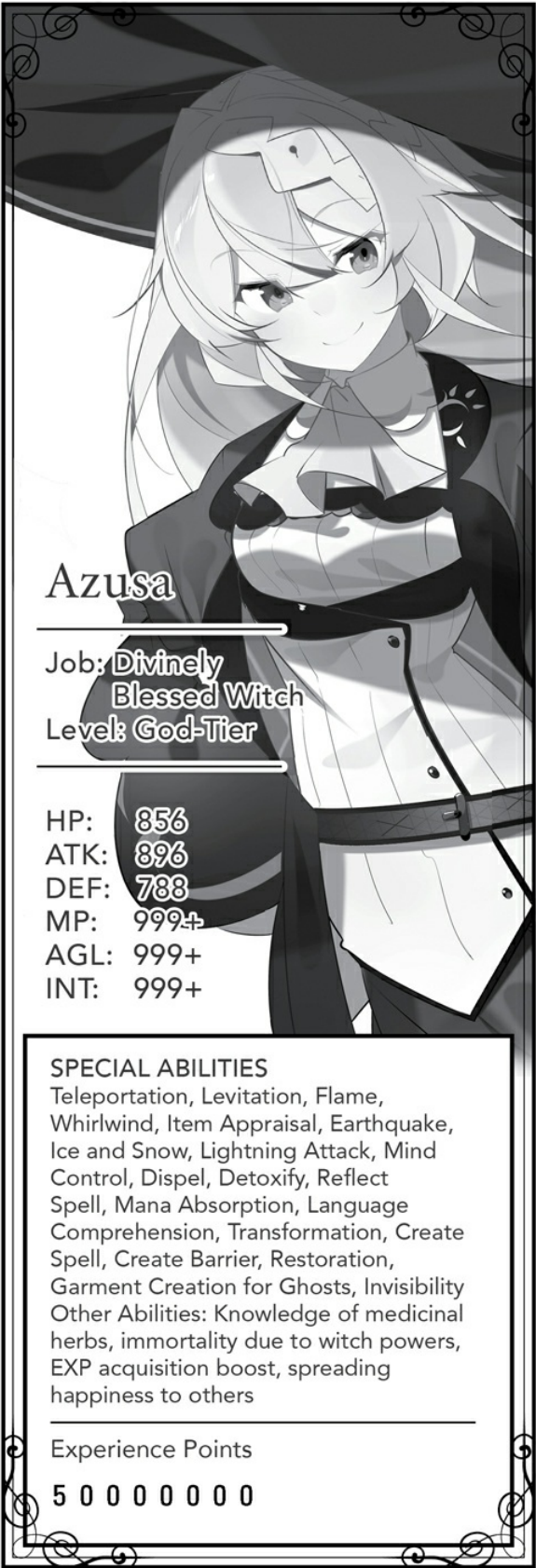
Maybe I should employ different standards when my enemy is an actual god and not just god-tier...but I had to say something.

“Azusa! How wonderful! What a virtuous heart you have!”

Godly Godness sounded impressed. It did nothing to improve our situation, but it was still gratifying.

“Due to your behavior, I present to you this special Gold Virtue Stamp Card, already fully stamped!”

A glittering virtue stamp card appeared in my palm! This was the virtue stamp card to end all virtue stamp cards!



“—Wait, I don’t want this! Give me something more practical!”

Can you please recognize that we’re in danger here?!

“No. That is not any old virtue stamp card.”

I could hear Godly Godness croaking behind me.

“Look, there’s no point if they’re just gold. This might actually get stamp cards banned.”

“Only an incredibly noble person can fill a Gold Virtue Stamp Card—and when they do, they receive power on par with that of a god! In a word, you’ve leveled up!”

My whole stat card appeared in midair.

“I thought I’d maxed out my level, but I just broke the level cap!”

I was impressed with the miracles an active-duty god could pull off... Even as a frog...

“Rrrrgh... You have god-tier powers now...? No human could contend with Us...”

Cautiously, the goddess Nintan approached me.

Well, let’s make a move and see what happens.

I was next to her before she realized what I was doing. Her movements looked really slow to me.

I was moving faster than Nintan could react! Now I stood a chance!

I put a bit of space between us for the moment.

“What, you just came to say hello?”

“Goddess Nintan, aren’t you missing something important?”

She then noticed what was wrong. “She took Our weapon...? When?”

That’s right—I stole Nintan’s sword, then darted away again.

“I feel so light, like I never even joined the workforce at all!”

“How can this...? Anything that destroys tradition cannot be...”

The enemy went pale. All this talk about tradition was starting to sound kind

of fishy.

“Tradition is important, but isn’t it more important that people are happy? If Godly Godness’s teachings are making people happy, then I don’t think you should stifle them. Even if they are weird.”

I told Nintan my opinion.

Even though I was up against a god, in a physical contest, we were on equal footing. I had the right to tell her how I felt.

“At the very least, attacking a frog is beneath a god. Tradition or not, it’s bad.”

“Rrrgh... We... We cannot refute that...”

It wasn’t like I was trying to argue with her, though... As long as she reconsidered, that was fine with me.

“H-however! Even without a weapon, We can fight barehanded! Submitting to a human is unprecedented! We shan’t allow it!”

Ooh, she was stubborn.

“Ah~! I see, I see~ I toadally get it now, ribbit~!”

Godly Godness was adapting to being a frog...

“Basically, the goddess Nintan is just an old lady croaking about the young, ribbit~!”

Nintan’s face flushed bright red. The frog goddess sure hit a nerve there!

“No! That is utterly wrong! We do not suffer the vices of the elderly! We do not allow anything contrary to how a god must—”

“When humans were born into this world, did grand-temple-style architecture exist, ribbit? If precedent is all that matters, then isn’t it a leap to say gods need shrines erected to them, ribbit?”

Holy crap, the frog goddess was going to talk her down!

“D...damn you!”

The goddess Nintan rushed to attack me, her eyes welling with tears.

I mean, I was the one holding the sword, though... I had to get rid of it...

It turned into a hand-to-hand battle, but I clearly had the advantage. To me, she was hardly moving at all. There was no way I could lose.

Nintan soon started panting and staggering.

The fight with Godly Godness had already worn her down, so she probably couldn't fight anymore.

"I think it's about time for you to surrender now."

"Ha! We still have a plan!"

Gods sure liked their plans...

"You will become a—"

Before she could produce the ray of light that would turn me into a frog, I zipped in close and covered her mouth with my left hand.

"Mrrrrrrffghhh! Mghghgh! Mrrrrrr!"

"Too bad. I moved before you could talk."

I kept my hand over her mouth for a moment before she finally crumpled to the ground.

It seemed like she'd passed out.

Yep, I win.

Nintan regained consciousness before long.

I actually didn't know gods could faint. I wondered who was looking after the world during that time, but in a polytheistic world, I guess that wasn't a problem.

"How could We have fallen to a human...? We have failed." Nintan slowly stood.

"Ha-haaa. You made a real splash, ribbit!" the frog goddess cheered as she bounced in place.

She was enjoying this way too much, wasn't she? Maybe we should actually work to spread that optimism...

"Goddess Nintan, could you please reconsider forbidding Godly Godness's

faith? I doubt it's a particularly harmful ideology to this world."

I started by nailing down the most important part of this whole mess.

"All right... I will acknowledge those virtue stamp cards of yours..."

Great, now that issue was solved.

"It is conceivable We have grown somewhat intolerant. We had unknowingly come to resist change."

The frog didn't need to chime in with "That's where old-lady problems start!" but she did anyway.

Hey! We can't afford another fight, so watch your mouth!

"Indeed. Nothing can be born by merely protecting tradition."

Hey, Nintan accepted it graciously. I guess she wasn't much of a sore loser, then.

"Accepting new things is, in fact, how we can preserve tradition. We must be flexible when it comes to that."

"Indeed. The people who eat the most bread in Japan live in the old capital of Kyoto, after all."

"The goddess definitely doesn't understand what that means..."

I had no use for new trivia on Japan, either.

"Yes! We shall issue virtue stamp cards at Our temple, too!" Nintan declared in high spirits.

...Wait, things were taking a weird turn here!

"We will have Our priests create Nintan-issued virtue stamp cards! We will send an oracle posthaste!"

"No! That's plagiarism! This system was my idea!" The frog goddess immediately panicked. It was true that if Nintan incorporated this, then Godly Godness's most distinguishing feature would vanish.

"But incorporating the best parts of the newest things can prevent problems an otherwise elderly person might cause. How can you complain?"

“I’ll take back calling you both old and a troublemaker, so please forgive me! I mean it, please!”

I watched from the outside, thinking how hard it must be in the god industry.

Authors’ rights and stuff probably didn’t exist here, so I hoped they’d solve this peaceably through discussion.

“Nonetheless, We are shocked to see the birth of a being who surpasses a god. We cannot possibly know what new wonders the world might bring henceforth.”

The goddess Nintan turned to me with a look of chagrin.

I was well aware that I’d become a special individual.

Since I was already the strongest in the world, though, I had a feeling my position hadn’t changed much.

“There’s nothing wrong about a world with an unknowable future. A world whose future is predetermined isn’t that exciting anyway.”

The frog goddess said, “Oh, that was such a cool thing to say. I call dibs! I am putting it in my scripture!”

Once you get too close to a god, you can’t respect them anymore. It’s just fact.

Plus, she already abandoned the frog talk... She had no commitment...

“Goddess Nintan, please pardon us for being so disrespectful earlier. It’s Godly Godness’s fault.”

“You defeated Us. Call Us Nintan.”

Was this some exceptional treatment I’d just been given?

“N-Nintan... Are you sure that’s okay?”

“Mm. Yes. If you ever have any trouble, We can talk you through it if you come to visit.”

I’d established a new connection with a god. These were some serious bragging rights, way more than just knowing a famous artist or something.

“We shall send an oracle to the priests commanding them to treat Azusa, the Witch of the Highlands, with respect.”

“Oh, uh... Please don’t make it too much of a big deal...”

That could completely shatter my leisurely lifestyle.

“Hmm, is that so? We can collect a uniform tax throughout the country to turn your manor into something more sublime.”

“No! Please don’t!” *That would just make everyone hate me!*

“Very well. We will keep it reasonable. Leave it to Us.”

“Okay... Yes, reasonable, please...”

The divine scale was immense, so I had to manage our relationship carefully. Otherwise, this could get scary.

“Now We must return to our pile of work.”

Oh, I didn’t want to get in the way. “Please pardon our intrusion. We’ll be going now.”

“Yes. If you go that way, you will arrive back at the grand temple.”

I waved to her and ran through the space.



Before I knew it, I was inside the grand temple.

The people gathered there stared at me in shock. I probably just popped out of nowhere, didn’t I?

“Thank you for your time! Wow, I’m sure glad we made the pilgrimage all the way to the great temple, huh?!” I announced loudly and deliberately before leaving.

“Thank you so much!” Godly Godness said once we were outside. “If you hadn’t come with me, I would have been in real trouble. I really shouldn’t underestimate branch manager–class gods, should I~?”

“Could you at least wait until we get away from the temple to say that?”

Nintan would get mad at us again, and I wasn’t going to take responsibility for

that...

Even after we left the grounds, I had a feeling people were staring pretty hard at us.

No one could tell I'd gotten stronger just by looking at me, so what was the deal?

Actually, I realized people were looking more at Godly Godness than me...

"I suppose we should head back, then~! Our problem's been solved!"

Oh.

I noticed something very important.

"Godly Godness, you're still a frog!"

Nintan hadn't turned her back to normal!

"Oh no! I thought everything had been settled nicely, but it wasn't~!"

Shortly thereafter, we had Nintan return Godly Godness to her original form.

GHOST STORIES WITH A GHOST

We went to the ancient nation of ghosts, the Thursa Thursa Kingdom, for a long overdue visit.

Muu had met us last time, so I figured I'd take Rosalie this time. We were traveling on Laika in her dragon form, and Halkara was coming along to collect herbs, so there were four of us in all.

"Thank you, Big Sis. I know it's a lot of trouble," Rosalie said with some hesitation. She was a ghost, but she was riding on Laika.

"If you want to thank anyone, thank Laika. She's taking us there. I just made the suggestion."

"Oh, no. Seeing more of the world is beneficial to me, so I welcome this heartily."

"That really is an exemplary thing to say, Laika. I'm impressed if that's how you really feel..."

I'd never be able to say something like that outside an interview.

"There are many undiscovered plants in the area around the kingdom, so I am excited, too~ ♪ I also wonder if there are any good mushrooms there~ ♪"

"Halkara, you're welcome to gather all the new mushrooms you want, but just ignore the ones with strong poison, okay...?"

I didn't want someone to die because of a handling mistake...

"It's all right—but you do have a point. I will be careful. An unknown forest is dangerous for an elf, too."

"Hey! You've grown! You're aware that it *is* dangerous!"

"A thousand years ago, the elves who entered these woods spread a new kind of disease, and so many people died because of it, see..."

Wait, that's kind of a big deal!

"Oh well, that was a long time ago, so I think you're worrying too much... Ha-ha, ha-ha-ha... Oh, now that I've remembered that happened, I'm scared..."

Now I was frightened, too.

Unknown lands came with these kinds of risks...

"Oh, Madam Teacher... I'm ill with anxiety now..."

I felt like it was a mistake bringing Halkara along.

Finally, we arrived at the Thursa Thursa Kingdom and all their ziggurat-like ruins.

Even though Muu was the queen, she came out to greet us right away.

I mean, I wasn't surprised she walked so fast because she spoke with a cockney accent. I mean, strictly speaking, it wasn't a *cockney* accent, but that's what it sounded like to me.

"Hey, ya finally got 'ere! Since we're out already, why don't I take ya to a part o' the woods that's nearby?"

The queen herself was going to escort us. I couldn't really ask for anything else.

"You cannot do that, Your Majesty." Nahna Nahna suddenly appeared behind us, still in her midriff-baring maid outfit. The ghost usually appeared out of nowhere and startled me. "The plague mosquitoes are out in the woods at this time of year. When the living are bitten, they get itchy all over and die a year later."

What an awful disease!

"Oh yeah, yer not wrong. I've been dead for so long, I forgot. It's a real nasty bout. The itchiness shatters most poor souls in a week."

I didn't want her forgetting something so dangerous.

"Oh, maybe I shouldn't have come along..." Halkara had already gone pale. I was thinking the same.

"It's safe inside the ruins, so why don't you hang out together there?" Nahna

Nahna said, her face devoid of expression. She looked cold at a glance, but she was good at her job. “Our sanitation, of course, as well as our seismic reinforcement has all been done to perfection.”

“You’re so fastidious for ghosts...”

And so we ended up chatting inside the ruins of the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.

There weren’t any eye-popping attractions in the ruins, but our reason for coming this time was mainly to watch Rosalie talk candidly with Muu anyway.

We, the living, just had to curiously admire the inside of the ruins.

We took a tour as Muu gave us a few lectures here and there.

Meanwhile, Rosalie and Muu spent a lot of time talking.

“Did the Thursa Thursa Kingdom have any famous dishes?”

“Lessee. The sea’s far away from ’ere, yeah, so seafood’s dear, y’see. Back then, people who lived near the sea were too scared of octopuses to eat ’em, so we imported ’em for cheap an’ ate ’em.”

Octopuses were a little grotesque-looking, so I kind of understood.

“Oh, ’cause they’re all wriggly. They’re kind of like monsters.”

“But they’re surprisingly good. Then we put ’em in a batter made o’ flour an’ fry ’em into a ball.”

Hey, isn’t that takoyaki...? Nah, it couldn’t be...

“We called the dish ‘the gem o’ the crimson devil.’ It tastes lovely, but I’m the only one wiv a body round here, so they stopped makin’ ’em.”

The name was kinda badass, but I was pretty sure it was a cousin of *takoyaki*...

Afterward, Rosalie and Muu kept chatting about ghost stuff.

“Then some adventurers showed up, an’ they were up an’ brown bread in the ruins. I was finkin’, *Don’t die here—die outside!*”

“Yeah, that’s rough... It’s annoying when the living come to test their courage, but it’s just more trouble when they die...”

Sounded like a relatable conversation for ghosts, but I couldn’t sympathize.

“An’ those dead adventurers still live here as ghosts. Nahna Nahna’s really puttin’ ’em to work, too. Bein’ a newcomer ain’t easy, even when yer dead.”

Muu suddenly stopped.

“No.”

“What’s wrong...?”

“There’s nuffin’ fun for livin’ people in this here ruin...”

Muu was genuinely concerned about this.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about us at all...”

“No! Ya gotta be hospitable for your guests! An’ if yer guests are bored, that’s an embarrassment to the Thursa Thursa Kingdom!”

She was oddly insistent about this. *Is that so...? Is that how the culture in this country works...?*

“To put it another way, anyfin’ goes so long’s it’s good. The best people are the best at somefin’—the one who makes everyone laugh the most. Doesn’t matter if it’s wiv a classic, a surreal joke, a one-liner, or somefin’ a little risqué.”

She was picky about the strangest things. These weren’t the country’s cultural standards—just hers.

“I would appreciate a funny story, but...it’s so gloomy in here, it scares me a little...,” Halkara said, shivering. I mean, we were still inside a tomb.

“Oh right. I got somefin’ mint!”

Muu clapped her hands together.

“It’s time for some spine-chillin’ tales!”

“Tails from a bunch of unknown creatures? That is pretty spine-chilling...”

“Yeah. I guess that’d depend on if they were still attached or not. Unattached, pretty gory. Still attached, then the fin’ could— Hey, not *those* tails!”

She caught on to my joke and jabbed back.

Then again, my remark was pretty weak—mostly because I didn’t want to exchange any scary stories.

“We were just talking about how gloomy and scary it is in here, so why are we telling creepy stories? That’s not okay!”

“I am also tempted to refuse...” Laika’s expression was tense, too. It didn’t seem like she could handle those kinds of stories well.

The family was full of scaredy-cats.

Halkara was the worst of all of us.

When we’d learned Rosalie was appearing at her factory and went at night to check, she’d been petrified.

“It’s fiiine. When we’re bored ’ere in the Thursa Thursa Kingdom, everyone goes round an’ tells funny stories. They always get a laugh, an’ we have a great time. It don’t cost no money or nofin’.”

Always making someone else laugh was an incredibly high barrier to entry.

“There’s several genres of these kinda stories, an’ one of the mainstream types are scary ghost stories. See, it’s perfect if you all talk about feelin’ a chill on yer back when it’s all hot an’ humid out.”

“This seems very difficult... Terrifying tales seem much easier than sidesplitting ones,” Laika said, her arms folded. She was too serious to easily come up with a story that would crack everyone up.

“A scary story, huh~? I have a few. I keep one in my back pocket from when I was in elf school.”

It sounded like Halkara would be able to join in, too.

I guess majority wins.



We moved to Muu’s room and sat in a circle.

There weren’t any chairs, so we sat right on the floor to get the mood going.

We dimmed the lights inside the room and lit a single candle.

Meanwhile, Nahna Nahna brought over some drinks for us. Ghosts could apparently carry things with willpower alone.

“Now then, let’s get started with our spooky stories. Who’s startin’?”

“Okay, I’ll start. I want to get this over with...”

I raised my hand. I was the kind to eat the stuff on my plate that I liked the least first. If I had to spend the whole time thinking about my own story, I would get tired of hearing the others. But then I’d also get tired of being scared, so maybe that was okay.

I did have a go-to story at the ready. I would bring a common tale from Japan straight to another world!

No one would know what this was (or at least, they shouldn’t), and I would be perfectly happy if it scared them.

“Ahem, okay. Here goes.”

This was a story any Japanese person would know.

“In a certain town, at a certain school, there was a strange rumor spreading among the children about a woman with long hair. She kept her mouth covered with cloth and would suddenly speak to you. A boy heard the rumor and thought it was eerie.”

Yes, this was the otherworld version of the slit-mouthed woman, the *kuchisake-onna*.

“One day, as the boy walked along an empty street, he heard a woman’s voice behind him. When he turned around, there was a woman with long, black hair, her mouth covered with cloth. The woman then asked, her mouth still covered: *Am I pretty?*”

“Madam Teacher, that’s so predictable!”

Halkara criticized me in the middle of my story. *Hey, that’s kinda rude.*

But nobody in my audience was remotely impressed.

Wait, was it my fault? What did she mean by “predictable” anyway?

“Lady Azusa, that’s the story of the slit-mouthed ogre. I heard it back in red-dragon school.”

“You have a scary story like this, too?!”

“I guess it’s still around, huh? I heard it a long time ago, too. That’s the one where she chases after ya super-fast if you try to run away, or ya can help her by chantin’ *pomadu, pomadu*, yeah?”

Even Muu knew the story... Why was this more widely known than the Japanese *kuchisake-onna*...?

“Ogres are so fast, aren’t they~? An elf could never outrun one, so it’s scary to us~”

They’re just really strong. That doesn’t make them extra scary, does it?

“Ogres with slit mouths were apparently especially violent. According to what I’ve heard, they had a much slimmer chance of getting married compared with other ogre tribes, so they went extinct.”

We’d moved from scary stories to sad stories, for some reason.

“One theory states that the reason the ogre chases after you is because they’re bad at communicating. They simply want to be friends.”

“I’m starting to feel sorry for them!”

“Yeah, this isn’t interesting... What a letdown.”

Hey! This just makes me sound boring! I don’t want to leave it here.

“Wait. I have another one...”

I had to preserve my honor! Time to start the next story!

“One night, the driver of a carriage was passing a ridge when he spotted a woman raising her hand. The driver, thinking it strange to find a lone woman all the way out here—”

“Madam Teacher, that’s just the ghost carriage. That’s the one where he goes to collect his payment and the woman is gone, right?”

The story aligned with one from this world again!

“...Okay, that’s enough. Do someone else...”

No matter what I said, someone would be like, *Yes, we hear that one a lot...*

Maybe I’m okay with being boring...

“Okay, I’ll go next!”

Halkara raised her hand. I wondered if she could pull off telling a scary story.

“This is a tale from back when I was a student in the elf lands. Four of us girls left school together, and we were chatting at a café.”

That was a normal introduction.

“The other three girls were part of a close group of friends in my class, and they invited me along this time. It really felt like all of us were just laughing the entire time. Ahhh, that was youth!”

What was going to happen now?

We all held our breath, listening intently.

“After about an hour, one girl left early because she had cram school to attend. Everyone said ‘Byeee!’ and ‘See ya later~’ to her.”

Oh-ho. What was going to happen to her...?

“Then, when she was gone, the eyes of the other two suddenly grew cold enough to give me goose bumps.”

Whoa, did something possess them...?

“They started talking. ‘Don’t you think she’s been going a little too over the top lately?’ ‘Yeah, it’s seriously pissing me off.’ I was so shocked! They were supposed to be friends!”

“That’s just a spiteful story!”

“They were terrifying... They immediately switched to bad-mouthing the girl who’d left first... It still chills me to this day...”

“Sis Halkara, I don’t think that’s exactly the kind of ‘scary’ we’re lookin’ for...,” Rosalie interjected. Yeah, she was right...

“Awful. Not scary at all. Rubbish,” Muu complained. If anyone had a right to nitpick ghost stories, it was a ghost.

This time, Laika raised her hand.

“I will tell the next tale.”

Oh, what was Laika going to talk about? This should be interesting.

“This is also a story from when I was a student. There was a pupil who would mention that he was the strongest every opportunity he got, and he was high-handed to those around him.”

He sounded like a show-off.

“He never entered any red-dragon tournaments, yet he always declared he knew this and that move and could spew so much fire.”

Laika’s eyes were serious. All of her listeners were drawn in.

“But then, his friends entered him into a tournament without him knowing.”

Ooh, we were getting into the meat of the story.

“...The day of the tournament, he absconded and moved to another dragon land. His lies had grown beyond his control, and he ruined himself out of embarrassment. How terrifying.”

“That isn’t a ghost story!”

I had wondered if Laika would be able to tell a creepy tale, but it turned out she couldn’t.

That was just a case of a pathological liar doing everything he could to hide that he lacked any real power...

“Anyone can fail. It is not embarrassing. However, he created a situation in which he could not afford to fail and was ultimately no longer able to show his face. Those who are unable to acknowledge their weakness are thus defeated by their pride. How terrifying...”

Okay, but that’s a weird thing to get scared by.

“What the hey...? Yer all just girls who can’t tell scary stories, huh?”

Muu’s categorization of us was both insulting and oddly specific. What, are girls supposed to be able to tell scary stories?

“Guess it’s up to me then, huh? I’ll tell you the tale of a ghastly incident.”

A ghost story told by the queen of poltergeists, huh? This had to be good.

“K-thunk, dmp, dmp, dmp, dmp, dmp, dmp, fwoooooo....., thwaaaam! Krrrtchhh, whump, ka-doooooom! —Whaddaya think?”

“They’re just sound effects!”

I didn’t even know what the story was about!

“That was a story about a massive boulder that fell onto a village below an’ kept rollin’ right through several houses.”

“No disaster stories! That is not a ghost story!”

“I thought it needed a little more detail as well.”

Both Halkara and Laika voiced their criticisms. It didn’t seem like I was the only one who thought there was a problem with it. At the same time, both their stories had issues, too...

“Wh-why...? Why didn’t my story land...? It placed me high on the Quick Joke Grand Prix rankings, though...”

That was definitely a tournament just meant to make people laugh...

Then, the light from the candle lit up the floor—

—where the face of a woman appeared.

“Eeeeeek! A ghost!!”

“Gah, who is that?!”

“Madam Teacher, a ghost appeared because we were telling scary stories!”

Laika, Halkara, and I were scared out of our wits.

“Of course. I am a ghost, after all.”

On a closer inspection, it was Nahna Nahna.

There were cups floating in midair, so she had probably come to bring us new drinks.

“I decided to catch you by surprise by coming out of the floor.”

“Don’t do that! No practical jokes, okay?!”

“But all your stories were practically jokes.”

It was a solid argument. My stories just barely qualified as ghost stories, but the others weren't even scary.

"There was not much difference between them. I am a brass-level ghost-story weaver."

"What the heck is that?"

"A ghost-story weaver was a job once just as popular as the magic knight, but not anymore."

Did a combat party in ancient times consist of the fighter, the mage, the priest, and the ghost-story weaver? That last one didn't sound very useful...

"Now then, I am off."

With that, Nahna Nahna vanished.

She had been the scariest part of this so far. It made me shiver...

All four of us had given it a try and failed.

The only one left was Rosalie.

"I guess you're saving the best for last, huh?"

Now that I thought back on it, Rosalie had barely spoken this whole time.

It was almost like she thought her spookiness would escape if she opened her mouth.

"This is the story that the drowned spirit told me when we went to the beach a little while ago."

Her premise was already unfair.

"They're known as the 'drowned' spirit, but their friend actually poisoned them and threw them into the ocean. They'd lent a lot of money to their friend for his business enterprise, but when they asked for the money back, they were invited out to the beach, and their friend poisoned them with the intention of killing them. You know, it happens."

I thought I felt a cold wind at the back of my neck.

Was there a breeze in these ruins...?

“Since the spirit hadn’t exactly drowned, they apparently managed to make their way to the one they now despised, consumed by thoughts of exacting revenge. On the other hand, though, a part of them wanted to forgive their killer. Do you know why?”

This didn’t mean she was asking us. This was one way of telling the story.

What was going to happen...?

“The friend who’d poisoned them had a loving family, a wife and two children. If the murderer were to die, the family would lose their livelihood. So instead of eliminating the culprit, they instead chose”—Rosalie paused here —“not to harm the innocents.”

Laika was inadvertently nodding.

“Once, the ghost saw the killer hiding the poison he’d used to commit his crime in a cabinet. His wife found it, questioned him about it, and said she would forgive him if he regretted his actions. The ghost thought that was okay for a compromise, since the innocent family wouldn’t be injured by it. But—”

Rosalie’s gaze bore straight into us.

My body temperature plummeted... *What was with this weird pause...?*

Things were going to speed up soon...

“One day, the two children were making mischief in the cabinet. They took some cooking powder and the poison powder—and switched them. Of course, they didn’t know it was poison. They probably thought it would just make their food taste funny.”

Laika had her arms wrapped around herself in a hug. Oh, this was bad...

“At dinner that night, the children were the first to collapse. The panicked wife vomited blood and stopped moving. The killer, who was larger and more robust, was the only one left in the end. The ghost watched the whole thing.”

Rosalie’s face looked distorted in the candlelight.

“Even though the killer shouldn’t have been able to see the ghost, he looked to it and said, *‘It was you! You did this! You set this curse!’* The ghost said it wasn’t their problem to solve, but the awful man could not hear them. *‘Why did*

you keep me alive...? It was cruel of you to kill the rest of my family! ‘No! I *didn’t curse you!*’ That was when the poison finally took effect, and the killer perished. The whole family was gone.”

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Oof... That left a nasty aftertaste...

“Then, the ghost realized something: *Oh, I didn’t want to cause innocent people hardship. The family died immediately, so of course they never lost their livelihood or had to endure any difficulty.*”

I felt myself shiver a bit.

“—So you can see the will of a ghost has real power that can inadvertently take form in the living world. Even though the ghost had been killed, they remain conscious of their guilt. They are still adrift today... The end.”

Then, the light of the candle suddenly went out.

The room was shrouded in darkness.

“Gah! Why did it go out?!”

“Aaaaaaaaaah! I cannot handle this! Eeeeeeeek!”

“Help, help! I will do anything! Please, I will do anything!”

All three of us from the house in the highlands fell into a panic.

I *had* to scream. I couldn’t take silence *and* darkness!

“Big Sis, there is a sequel to this. Do you want to hear it?”

I could hear Rosalie’s voice in the darkness.

“No! No thank you! I do *not* want to hear it! Especially not when it’s dark like this!”

Suddenly, the candles in the room lit up again.

“Turning off the light gives it much more power.”

There stood Nahna Nahna.

“Hey! What did you turn off the light for?! That was the worst possible timing!” I complained.

“The point is to be scared, is it not? And all these stories so far have been a farce.”

Wow, what a harsh audience...

“First things first, the one who gave the biggest scare with her story was Miss Rosalie. Congratulations.”

Nahna Nahna was applauding with a completely neutral expression, but since she was a ghost, the gesture made no sound.

“Th-thank you... I wasn’t confident you’d take it well...”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure. It was good that it came with a lesson. Ghost stories based on fact tend to come with an air of mystery as to why things end up the way they do, which is what makes them frightening. I believe a fictional ghost story with a lot of structure like yours is best.”

This was a discussion for ghosts...

“Oh, but it’s a true story that I heard from a drowning victim.”

“Oh, there you go again. You must be joking, because that cannot—”

“No, they’re a drowning victim I know. I can bring ’em along, if you want.”

“No thank you... For some reason, I feel a chill on my back...”

Even Nahna Nahna was getting scared!

Holy crap, Rosalie?!

“But I am certain Her Majesty was satisfied with Miss Rosalie’s story. That was the skill of a platinum-level ghost-story weaver.”

I didn’t really understand the standards of these ghost-story weavers, but I guess it was amazing somehow.

“Your Majesty, don’t forget your honor as a ghost. You mustn’t fall behind—Your Majesty?” Nahna Nahna prodded.

Muu was collapsed on the floor, her eyes glazed. Was she dead...? I mean, she had been for a while, but... This was complicated...

Nahna Nahna peered down at Muu.

“She has passed out from fear. I believe she’ll come back to us in a few moments. Please wait.”

I didn’t know what to think about the sovereign of a country of the dead

collapsing from fear...

Muu finally woke up, but her complexion was paler than usual.

“That were intense... See, ghost stories that make the *ghosts* upset are way more intense... Ya fink you’re immune, then all of a sudden, it gets all personal...”

Now that she mentioned it, the ghosts themselves didn’t usually meet a horrible end.

“There was a certain nastiness to it—the kind ya get from the ghost stories that end all meta-like. *Anyone who hears this story will die.*”

Yeah, those were especially awful. Maybe not so much awful, but cowardly. Anyone would freak out if they were told they’d die after hearing something.

“Sorry, sorry. I just told you the story exactly how Deruta told it to me. It happened sixty years ago in a town just outside the royal capital.”

“Don’t add specifics to cater it more toward us! Sheesh, the game’s over already! Insurance runs are for baseball, not ghost-story weavership!”

Wait, what did sportsmanship have to do with this?!

“No more ghost stories, no more. Let’s do funny stories next... They say people live long lives if they’re laughin’ all the time!”

Was that supposed to be a joke? Or was it genuine? It was hard to tell, so I couldn’t comment on it.

“Oh hey, that’s a good idea. Let’s switch to lighter topics.”

I naturally agreed with moving on to stories that made us laugh. I liked that much better.

Laika and Halkara were hugging each other, and they both nodded.

It wasn’t an expression of love. It looked more like they’d grabbed the nearest person in terror when the candlelight went out. Anyone would want to make sure they weren’t alone.

“Humor... That is not a genre I am very good with...”

“I’m not very confident, either~”

I didn't know about Laika, but Halkara could definitely pull this off if she talked about her family back in her hometown.

Maybe I should use a story I'd heard in my previous life in Japan again.

I had a feeling, though, that they'd just say they always hear that kind of story, like before... Still, it was better than saying nothing at all. Right, I should think positive.

Actually, I wondered if Rosalie could pull off a story that could make us laugh. Wasn't she a lot worse at this than Laika? I mean, she'd been in that manor for such a long time as a ghost...

"A funny story? I have one of those!"

Oh, guess she doesn't see it as a problem at least.

"I have a great story I heard before from another ghost!"

"No more stories from ghosts!" Muu interjected. "Seriously, enough! Just hearin' ya say that word freaks me out... We're over! This is canceled!"

The queen forcefully shut her down.....

"Your Majesty, you are quite cowardly. It is not very fitting for a sovereign."

Nahna Nahna must've thought she'd struck gold teasing her...

"Leave me alone! I'm just scared, okay...?"

"Then how will you offer everyone hospitality? A queen must entertain her guests. As you are now, you are simply a selfish ghost."

Wow, that was disparaging!

"...All right, we'll have a gem-o'-the-crimson-devil party. I'll treat 'em to that!"

That's—takoyaki!

"It's sooo good. You pop it in yer mouth when it's steamin' hot, an' you gotta breathe around it when it feels like it's gonna burn ya—so good~! The inside is all gooey with the springy octopus in the middle."

That was literally *takoyaki*.

"Your Majesty, we should be able to get some flour, but we have no octopus.

We cannot have this party.”

“Then put somefin’ else in that’ll work! What about kraken? Fried kraken’s mint! Ya dissolve the flour, put in some chopped kraken, then fry it all at once on a hot metal plate!”

She changed it into *ikayaki* this time!

“Your Majesty, we do not have any kraken. Obviously. It’s time to give up.”

They were nowhere near the ocean, so of course they didn’t have any.

“No! I’m not givin’ up! I’m gonna make somefin’ for ’em!”

“No. Give up.”

“Miss Nahna Nahna, you’re starting to sound too firm and casual! Please be a little more polite with her!”

After that, Muu and Nahna Nahna fought for a little while longer—and we finally got to put on something that was kind of like a *takoyaki* party.

They didn’t have octopus, so we used meat from other animals in the “gems o’ the crimson devil.” There were boars and deer in the forest, after all.

“Well? Is it good? It has to be! I can’t eat it myself, so I dunno how it tastes!”

That’s right—Muu was kind of like an undead in that way, and Nahna Nahna was a complete ghost, so we were the only ones who could taste the dish.

“It’s really good! Thank you!”

“Yes, I could eat a hundred of these.” Laika was laying it on really thick there... She wasn’t going to actually eat a hundred of them, surely...

“Eating good food is always better than scary stories.”

I’d heard that when people prepare *takoyaki* at home, they make variants with ham or cheese inside—this must be how that felt.

Even Rosalie, who unfortunately couldn’t eat, kept chatting with Muu about ghost things.

I was glad everyone seemed to be having a good time.

“Thank you, Miss Azusa.”

Nahna Nahna came beside me. She was so close, she overlapped me a bit...

“Her Majesty does not have many friends, so it is always a great relief when you come to see her.”

Nahna Nahna briefly bowed in thanks. She was always so diligent in her care of the queen.

“Yeah, I was thinking about coming more in the future for Rosalie’s sake, too. I actually think I should even bring the whole family along.”

Right now, everyone was thoroughly enjoying their time in the country of poltergeists.

One of us, though, was having some difficulty.

Halkara’s eyes were brimming with tears, and her hand was pressed to her mouth.

Did the *takoyaki* (-like thing) not agree with her?

“It’s so hot on the inside, my mouth is bur-*hing*...”

“Oh yeah... Eat it carefully, okay...?”

Always blow on *takoyaki* before eating.

I WENT TO A DESERT ISLAND

“Oh no...,” I muttered, my voice groggy.

Before me was a beach, ocean waves lapping against it. Beyond it was a vast, empty sea—or so I thought, but there were lots of islands out there.

This island was a part of that cluster. I said *island*, but it was tiny, small enough for me to walk around in thirty minutes. I think it would be better described as a mountain floating in the sea.

“I guess this is what you’d call a desert island, huh...?”

So why was I out here all alone?

Let’s go back a little bit.



One hour earlier, I was riding on Laika in her dragon form, heading to the south.

“Oh, sorry about all this, Laika, but the herb I’m thinking of only grows in the south...”

“I do not mind. I am your apprentice, Lady Azusa.”

Well, I knew that was how she was going to respond, but I still shouldn’t rely on her too much.

“Some parts of my medicine-making have been slipping lately. I thought I should do a thorough search for some good herbs.”

“I understand. I have a feeling your strength has improved lately. Anything combat-related may not even be necessary for a while.”

“You can tell all that... I’m impressed, Laika...”

I did actually grow stronger. Even though I was supposed to be at max level, I went above that, thanks to the Godly Godness incident.

Getting stronger was always better than the opposite, but I had a feeling I was getting further and further from my real job as a witch... So I went searching for herbs to get back to my roots.

“The wind is really warm here, isn’t it~?” I observed, riding on Laika’s back.

“I believe there’s a warm current blowing here. And I’m not very far off the ground.”

Wow, it really was the perfect temperature.

“I doubt you have any reason to worry, Lady Azusa, but do take care not to fall.”

“Well, even if I did, I can levitate with my magic.”

“Yes, that’s right. My concerns were unfounded.”

—Ten minutes later or so...

“So warm...so warm...”

I was practically asleep.

No, I can’t fall asleep. I have to stay awake...

—Another five minutes later...

I (apparently) zonked out completely.

My body tilted over—

—and I (apparently) fell off Laika.

By the time I actually came to, I was midair, and I’d already fallen quite a long way.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!! Oh no!”

In a panic, I cast Levitation and slowly descended toward the earth.

Luckily, the patch of ocean right below me was full of different islands and not the open sea. I picked the one that looked the biggest and crash-landed on the beach.

It didn’t seem like Laika had noticed I’d fallen, and she flew off into the distance.



And so I'd come to what looked like a desert island.

However, I couldn't be certain it was deserted. Obviously, there was more to it than just me and a single palm tree. A whole forest and a mountain stood behind me.

"Now what should I do...? I guess things'll work out."

I felt no sense of impending danger. My stats were high enough to let me beat any animal, and I could fry and freeze things with my magic.

If anything, I felt terrible for making Laika worry.

Knowing I needed to make some kind of sign, I wrote **AZUSA HERE** in big letters. I'd initially written **AZUSA'S CRIB**, but...that sounded more like an invitation.

"I hope she'll see this..."

Staying here wouldn't accomplish anything, so I tried to see if I could use Create Spell to warp myself back to the house in the highlands or link me telepathically to Laika, but nothing worked.

Since I was creating these spells using the knowledge I'd accumulated over the years, that didn't mean I could just whip up anything that came to mind.

I could probably put something together with a bit of studying, but I didn't have any of my tomes. I also couldn't just sit around meditating on what I knew and expect some light bulb to suddenly go off. I needed resources.

"Okay, I'll live here for the time being!" I declared defiantly.

There was no point brooding over it—I was going to think positively!

"First, I need to secure food, clothing, and shelter. For food, I can probably find some nuts somewhere on the island. For clothing, I have what I'm wearing, so I'm fine. That means the most important thing is...to do something about shelter."

I entered the forest and snapped some trees.

Tearing them down was easy, but I didn't know if I had the skills to assemble

them...

I buried the trees and secured them in a spot where the ground was firm. These would be the support pillars. Then, I put holes in the pillars and passed thinner trees through them from the side. These acted as crossbeams.

There were lots of palm-looking leaves, so I would use those to make the roof.

Laika had renovated the house in the highlands a long time ago, so I wondered if this was similar. It was like making a house out of matches.

After about an hour and a half, my temporary hut was finished.

Doors and locks were too hard, so none of that!

I just gathered a bunch of grasses to make my bed. There was quite a heap of them, and since climate was warm here—hot, even—I probably wouldn't be catching a cold.

"Yep, I think that'll do for my shelter."

Next was food.

I went into the forest again and ran into a rather large bird.

The bird also looked startled to see me. *What kind of weird thing did I just run into...?* it seemed to be thinking. At times like this, anyone would stop in their tracks...

The bird was about to fly away, so I burned it to a crisp before it could!

"Yep, food won't be a problem."

I wish I had some seasoning, though... Hold on, I bet I can get some.

There was a coconut tree, so I scooped out the inside of the coconut and made a simple bucket.

Then I filled an indented stone that was right next to the ocean with sea water.

I used Flame to dry it out.

Rinse and repeat.

After several rounds of this, salt finally started to gather at the bottom.

“Yees! Minerals, precious minerals!”

This could keep me going for a good while. My first day of survival would have earned me a passing grade, I think.

But now I was living the survival life instead of relaxing...

That night, I lit a fire to act as a beacon, but Laika never came.

It was hard to tell where exactly I fell, and Laika wasn't exactly traveling along a standard route like a train. I wouldn't be easy to find.

I sprinkled salt over the roasted bird and ate it.

“This is surprisingly good...”

I kept hydrated with the liquid inside a coconut. It tasted like diluted juice, but I could drink it.

It was still too early to sleep, so I built a fire on the shore and gazed out to sea.

“Mmm. I guess camping like this is bound to happen at least once in such a long life. It's not so bad.”

I looked at the crackling flames of the fire. I was alone—of course I was. The island was deserted.

“Oh yeah, this is the first time I've been alone in a looong time,” I commented, carefree.

When I heard myself say that, I realized just how long it had been.

I'd lived alone in the house in the highlands for three hundred years.

I'd woken up and gone to bed alone, of course, and I'd rarely ever considered my solitude difficult or sad.

The village of Flatta wasn't that far away, after all. I could mingle with other people all I wanted if I went down to the village. I guess that didn't make it much different from living alone in Japan.

But once Laika joined me, my had life changed dramatically. Almost literally—like something straight out of a TV show.

Falfa and Shalsha had shown up, then Halkara joined the group. Then came Rosalie, Flatorte, and Sandra.

When you counted the visits from Beelzebub and Momma Yufufu, things had gotten even livelier.

I'll throw Pecora's name in there, too, because she might get mad if I don't name her specifically...

I'd lived alone for much, much longer, but I could never go back to that life. Living with everyone was way more fun.

"I know this is a luxury, but...I think that's why I sometimes need time alone like this."

Solitude like this was precious and perfect for reflection.

Being alone helps you truly appreciate your family and how thankful you are for them.

Okay. The next day, I was going to go in the forest and do a thorough search to see if I could find any good plants to use in medicines.

I had to accomplish something from my original quest, especially when Laika was probably busy looking for me.

The rest of the family must have been worried, too. *I hope Falfa and Shalsha aren't crying.*

"Man, if only I had a phone... If only I could contact them..."

The next morning, I secured some more bird meat for breakfast and went into the forest.

I made markings so I wouldn't get lost—or I would have, but then I realized if I did lose my way, I could just use Levitation and make my way toward the beach.

Just a few steps into the forest, I found thickets and thickets of plants I'd never seen before.

"It's not so bad if I think of this as fieldwork."

I was relatively determined. Now that I had to spend time alone, I should at least do my job as a witch.

I'm gonna do everything I can do now! There's a lot I can only do when I'm alone on this (probably) deserted island!

There was a rustling sound coming from the underbrush.

Oh, another bird? Another delicious dinner for me!

I parted the tall, dense grass and pushed forward.

There, I ran into an odd creature.

It was about four feet tall with thick, fuzzy brown fur. It had two big, round eyes, short arms, and two feet that looked like they belonged to a penguin. It was toddling forward.

The thing reminded me of some kind of local mascot. I didn't think mascots like this existed in this world, but that was the first thing that came to mind.

What was this thing...?

A monster? A wild animal?

The mascot creature and I stared at each other.

This reminded me of when I ran into the bird the previous day, but I could sense the light of intelligence in this thing.

"Naaa, naaa, naaa."

I didn't know if that was its natural cry or if it was trying to talk to me, but it made a noise.

I followed its lead and said, "Naaa, naaa, naaa" in response.

"Naaa! Naaa! Nanananaaana!"

Its voice got louder!

Oh no, did I make it angry?! What was going to happen?

Then, a huge group of similar faces poked out from behind it.

It called its allies?!

They were working in groups, walking on two feet, so were they the indigenous people of this island...?

Had they decided I was their prey? A target for attack?

I was not going to lose, but I wanted to resolve this peacefully if possible.

If it came right down to it, I could escape using Levitation... The island wasn't very big, though, so there was a good chance they'd find my hut and attack it...

But—

The mascots started hopping in place.

“Naaa, naaa.” “Naaa, naaa.” “Naaa, naaa.” “Naaa, naaa.” “Naaa, naaa.”

It looked like they were...dancing. I didn't sense any hostility from them, at least.

Then I noticed one of the creatures was holding a leather sack.

It reached in and took something out—a pretty shell, nicely polished—and held it out to me.

“Are you giving this to me...?”

“Naaa, naaa.”

It looked like they were welcoming me.

I had a feeling my alone time was already over.



Afterward, the strange tribe brought me to their village.

There were a lot of little huts that looked like the one I'd made.

“So this island wasn't deserted...”

There was a little society here.

I was given a meal in the open space in the center of the settlement.

There was roasted bird presented on a leaf and sprinkled with some sort of spice.

There was also some kind of vegetable stir-fry sitting on another leaf.

No doubt about it—this was a warm welcome!



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“Thank you... Wait, they might not understand that, huh...? Naaa, naaa.”

“Naaana!” “Naaanaaanaaaa!”

I didn't really understand, but I could communicate somehow just by saying *Naaa, naaa*.

I had no idea a species like this existed... There's so much I don't know about the world...

I'd found way more here than just some weird-looking plants.

Upon closer inspection, these mascots came in different sizes.

The biggest of them was about my height. On the other hand, there were some that barely reached three feet. I guessed they were children.

Treating this tribe like they were mascot characters was kinda rude, so I decided to just call them the Masco Tribe for now.

Everyone was looking at me. Did they want me to eat?

I started with the vegetable stir-fry. Naturally, I ate with my hands. These vegetables were good, though I had no idea what any of them were.

“Ooh, the salt adds a lot; that's pretty good. I can see some leaves that taste kinda herby. I bet girls would like this a lot. Yeah, I love it.”

“Naaa?” “Naaa?”

They were asking me something. I guess they wouldn't understand if I said it was tasty or *delicioso* or any other human words.

“Naaa!” I replied with a vigorous thumbs-up.

“Naaanaaaa!” “Nananaaaa!” “Naaa!”

The Masco Tribe cheered. Communication!

Next up was the roasted bird.

It was a different species from the one I'd hunted. Using my hands again, I grabbed it and took a bite.

Ooh, it was overflowing with juices! The outside was crisp, and the inside was

succulent! The flavor was higher quality than I thought it would be!

“Naaa! Naaa! Super naaa!” I tried expressing how delicious it was in my own way.

The Masco Tribe started hopping with delight.

All right, now I knew how to communicate. If I just said *Naaa*, they’d know what I wanted to say!

Then, a member of the tribe brought over what looked like a piece of bark.

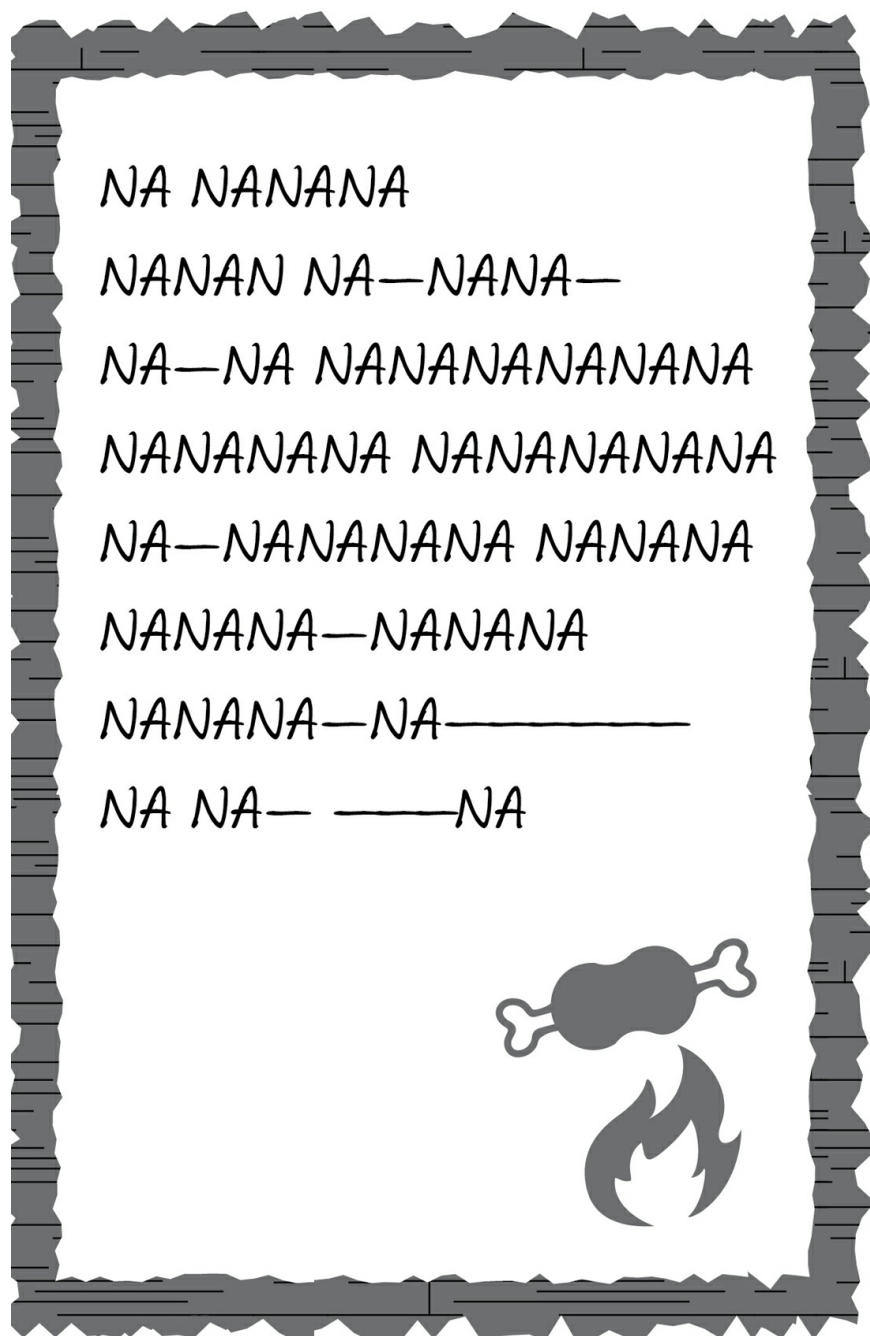
Inscribed on it was what looked like the Masco Tribe’s writing, and there was a picture of roasted meat in the lower right.

“Is this a menu?!”

The problem was that, to my eyes, the writing looked just like a series of capital *NAs* with horizontal bars.

I had no idea what kind of food they would give me! There weren’t even any hints!

This was like going into a fancy French or Italian restaurant and not being able to figure out what kind of food there was from the menu. Not like I ever went into restaurants *that* fancy, though...



What should I do? I already had chicken. If I got something overly filling, I might not be able to clear my plate. That might insult my hosts.

I was about 60 percent full, so I wanted to order something. I could still do a small dish like *ochazuke*—but they didn't have rice or the tea to pour on it to make *ochazuke*.

Was this even free? Or was this some kind of Masco Tribe establishment? They weren't going to ask me for money and then treat me like a dine-and-dasher, right...?

Well, those questions were beside the point.

I tapped my finger on the menu.

“I’ll have the second one from the top, please.”

One of the Mascos took my menu and left. I hoped my order got through...

My next selection finally arrived.

It was a soup with finely diced poultry and vegetables. The bowl was a coconut.

Ooooh! This looks pretty good!

I would probably burn myself if I tried eating with my hands, so I blew on it while drinking straight from the bowl.

It was delicious and just a little spicy. I was warming right up.

The soup was generous with the meat and vegetables, so it was filling my stomach nicely.

Geez, I was nervous at first about this weird restaurant, but this was great.

I told the Masco Tribe how delicious it was again with a little “Naaa!”

Many cheerful “Naaa!”s came in return. I’d already mastered the Masco Tribe tongue.

“By the way, do I need to pay you for the food I’ve eaten? Oh, you probably don’t understand that.”

I had to say it in their language.

“Naaa, nanana, naaanana?” (*Is this food free?*—was what I thought I was asking.) “Naaa.” (*Yes, it is*—was what I thought they said.) Yep, it was free. Perfect.

Afterward, about ten Mascos came to me.

I wondered what they were going to do, when one of the Mascos behind them started beating a big *taiko*-looking drum.

The Mascos in front of the drum started dancing in time to the rhythm.

“Naaa, naaa ♪” “Naaa ♪” “Naaa, naaa...na ♪Na ♪”

It was a welcome dance! I hadn’t really done anything for the Masco Tribe,

but they were entertaining me! Based on the singing, one of them was really tone-deaf!

I was being treated as their guest. If this were the bullet train, the service would rank higher than that of the green car. Something with a cool name. Like *grand cross* or something.

As I watched their weird dance, though, unease started bubbling inside me.

This was all way too good to be true...

I wasn't going to end up being offered as a sacrifice or anything, was I...?

To be honest, the Masco Tribe and their cutesy appearance didn't make them look like they'd do anything cruel, but they were still treating an outsider with almost too much warm hospitality...

I had a feeling the sacrifice option was much more likely...

If I got into trouble, I could just run...although escaping to my hut near the coast wouldn't actually solve the problem... Hurting the Masco Tribe wasn't my intention anyway, especially not after they'd fed me so well.

I watched the dance with mixed feelings, but it came to an end without incident, and the Mascos dispersed.

A Masco Tribe member took my serving leaf away.

Wait, they weren't even watching me?

No one was looking, so I could easily escape...

So they weren't going to sacrifice me. Maybe they would when night came, though, but I found it hard to believe they would leave me unattended if that was their plan.

"I guess I'll get some fieldwork done while I'm still safe..."



I decided to observe how the Masco Tribe lived.

There was a pair sitting facing each other across some kind of table.

By the way, the Mascos apparently couldn't sit down because of how their

legs were built. Their legs and feet were a lot like a penguin's, after all.

There were rows of black and white shells on the table.

Was this supposed to be a game of go?! It sure looked similar!

Both of the Mascos wore hard looks on their faces and stared at the board—although the Masco Tribe always had leisurely expressions, so I couldn't actually tell.

“Naaa. Naaa. Nananana, naaa.”

On closer inspection, there was one more Masco between the two that was saying something. Was that one the judge?

Reluctantly, one of the other Mascos put down a white shell.

What appeared to be the opposing player put down a black shell without a moment's hesitation.

At that moment, the Masco that had moved the white shell fell flat on its back.

The Masco that put down the black shell said “Naaanaaa” as it jumped. I guess that meant it was happy.

“They even have real games...”

Next, I went to a hut that had a lot of white smoke coming out of it. There, they were roasting and simmering fish and meat in an oven. Some were even busy boning and gutting fish.

Beside them was a Masco boiling some herbs.

“They're doing some serious cooking...”

Was their level of civilization much higher than I thought...?

As I stood in the middle of the kitchen, a Masco brought over a grass plate with some food on it for me.

Was this a taste test?

I said “Naaa, naaa” in thanks, then ate it. I wasn't sure what kind of dish this was supposed to be, but it was good anyway. I could eat it again~

“Naaa, naaa!” (To me, this meant *That was very tasty.*) “Nananaaaa.” (That’s what the Masco said. I think it meant *Glad to hear.*) Maybe I had been accepted into the community?

Before I knew it, the sun was setting.

A big group of Mascos came to me again.

“Naaananana.” “Nanaaanana.” “Na, nanana.”

They each spoke to me. I had no idea what they were saying...

Then the Mascos started moving. Some of them even turned back to look at me.

“I guess they want me to follow them.”

I followed the ten or so members of the group through the forest.

Where were we going? We were heading in the exact opposite direction of the beach where I was staying.

Finally, we reached our destination—a cliff that jutted out into the sea.

It was a little short to be a precipice, about thirty feet high at most.

The sound of the waves crashing against the cliff face rang painfully in my ears.

A sinister fantasy crossed my mind again as I looked at the violent water.

Could they be planning on sacrificing me by pushing me off...?

Of course, the entire village wouldn’t necessarily participate in a sacrifice.

It was very possible they would drop me from here as an offering to the ocean god...

The Mascos again said, “Naaa, naaa.” Were they telling me to jump?

Sorry, but I wasn’t going to die here.

Had the moment finally come where I had to leave the Masco Tribe?

But they ignored me as I tensed—

And then *they* started leaping into the ocean one after the other. They looked

like a group of penguins.

“You’re going in?!”

After a moment, the first Masco to jump came back, soaking wet.

Then it leaped from the cliff again.

“I guess this is their way of playing...”

You know, like how people in the countryside jump off bridges into rivers. I’d never seen it in real life but had read about it in stories that took place in the countryside. Something like that.

The Masco Tribe said something to me that sounded something like *You jump in, too!* But I said “Nana, na, nanana” (*No, thank you*) and refused.

When the sun finally set, the Masco Tribe members returned to the village from the cliff, satisfied. I followed them.

Back at the village, dinner had been prepared for us, and some of the Mascos were dancing as they lit the bonfire. I ate my meal as I watched them dance. Several dishes came out from an all-new menu, including a dish of fried fish that had been mixed with vegetables.

They led me to a bed made of gathered down, then to a rock bath filled with hot, boiled water.

“They’re being super thorough about this!” I commented as I stepped into the bath.

How strange... I’d been hoping to live the desert-island lifestyle, but now I was just a tourist...

I felt sorry for the rest of the family... I was taking a vacation all by myself.

I got out of the bath and crawled into bed but couldn’t get to sleep.

Should I keep living like this?

Probably not. I bet Laika was desperately looking for me...

“I should do something about this. I will tomorrow.”



The next morning, I woke up to the cries of the birds the Masco Tribe kept.

“Gockadooldoo, gockadooldoo,” they crowed like a rooster with a cold.

When I went to the clearing in the center of the village, the Masco Tribe was all hopping and twisting together in time with some music.

There was no other explanation for this—they were doing morning calisthenics!

The lifestyle of this tribe might have seemed primitive, but they were somehow refined...

Last night before I went to sleep, I’d decided I was going to take action today, but...I saw no harm in joining them for a stretch, too... It wasn’t a bad thing to get moving first thing in the morning...

Next was a good breakfast.

I got something that looked like a salad made of herbs with fermented beans. I wasn’t used to the smell of fermented food, but it wasn’t inedible.

Well then...now that I was full, it was time to move.

I walked to a spot far enough from the Masco Tribe settlement.

Just in case, I paid close attention to see if I was being watched, but no one followed me.

They were giving way too much freedom to an outsider... I wondered if they would survive if they ever had visitors with ill intent...

On the ground, I drew a certain magical circle.

I then added a demon incantation to it.

“Vosanosanonnjishidow veiani enlira!”

An ominous black wind appeared. *Yes, it worked!*

Beelzebub safely appeared about ten feet away from me, caught on a tree branch!

“Hell’s bells! Why must you always summon me to the oddest places?! Will you not let me appear normally on the ground?!”

Maybe I shouldn't have said she appeared "safely" ... Eh. Details...

The point was to summon Beelzebub! Now everything would work out!

Demons like Beelzebub would know all sorts of magic to get people from one place to another—and if she didn't, at least I had someone else around who understood me.

"Hey, Beelzebub, I actually fell from Laika, and one thing led to another..."

I gave a brief explanation of my situation.

"In short, this is all your fault... One must not sleep on a dragon... You may be the strongest in the world, but you are so oblivious to danger... Any regular person would have died from that..."

"Yeah, I'll be more careful next time... And sorry for summoning you so suddenly."

My strategy was to apologize before she called me out.

"Well, I know you were in an accident, but would using your Teleportation spell not be the quickest way about this? Although, if Laika is searching frantically for you, then it would be bad if you went back to the house in the highlands first..."

Even though this world had Teleportation magic, communication spells that could substitute for a telephone weren't very developed, not even among the demons. They always came all the way to our house to deliver invitations.

"No, that wouldn't be very nice to Laika. I'm also planning on staying on this island for a little while anyway. I'd really appreciate it if you could go back to the house in the highlands and let everyone know I'm safe."

"Aye. Your little mishap should not cause the girls any worry. I must let them know you are safe at once."

Seriously, stop talking about my daughters as if they're yours... Beelzebub was helping me, though, so I kept my mouth shut.

This solved my biggest problem.

"Also, I called you here because there's something else I want to talk to you

about.”

“Are you finally allowing me to adopt Falfa and Shalsha?!”

“Nope.”

I pointed in the direction of the Masco Tribe village.

“There’s a mysterious tribe of...somethings living over there! This might be the discovery of the century!”

I felt like it would be best to tell a demon about the Masco Tribe.

The demons were like an aggregate of all sorts of species, so they’d probably straighten this out however they thought was best. At the very least, the Masco Tribe was probably safer being discovered by demons than by human nations.

“What? A mysterious tribe?”

“Yes, yes! They’re strange, fuzzy creatures, but they’ve built houses, know how to cook, make music, and dance!”

Beelzebub’s expression was the epitome of doubt. If you’d ever wondered what doubt on someone’s face looked like, it looked like her.

Or did she not believe me? I wouldn’t tell obvious lies.

“Did this tribe put you in any danger? Either way, it is hard to imagine they would succeed.”

“Not at all. They welcomed me.”

“Then I suppose we can have a look at this tribe.” Beelzebub walked briskly off toward the village, and I followed her.

When we neared the settlement, I could hear the “Naaa, naaa,” “Naaa. Naaa,” again.

Apparently, the Masco Tribe noticed Beelzebub, too.

Oh, was this going to be a historical meeting between the demons and the Masco Tribe?!

“Ah, the yetis living on Sanshu Island. I am Beelzebub, the minister of agriculture of the demons,” Beelzebub deadpanned without a hint of surprise.

The Masco Tribe froze in place.

“Naaa, naaa... Oh, the minister of agriculture. Why is another VIP here?!”

They could talk normally?!

A lot of the tribe members could understand Beelzebub, too...

Beelzebub whirled around to look at me. I guess explaining things to me came first.

“Azusa, this is not any sort of mysterious tribe at all. This is a type of demon called a yeti. They usually live in rather frigid places, so I don’t suppose you have ever met one before.”

“Sorry... Let me just...get this situation straight...”

Beelzebub nodded and turned back to the Masco Tribe. “While I have you, could you fetch me your leader?”

“Very well. We will call the chief.”

I was the only one still confused...

Beelzebub and I were brought to the chief’s house, though it was really hard to discern which one was the chief.

“Ahem, now, Azusa, I shall explain.” Beelzebub cleared her throat. “This group of yetis is living as a tribal community here on Sanshu Island. In short, they are playing pretend.”

“Pretend...?!”

The chief spoke this time. “Yes. We yeti typically live in the frozen tundra, even in the demon lands. Many of us yearn to live in the tropics. That is why we kicked off a plan three years ago to live on a desert island, like a tropical-island tribe.”

Wait, uh, what...? This was kind of a shock...

“Then what’s with the *naaa, naaa*?”

“We wanted to. We just made a rule where we could only say *naaa, naaa*.”

You should have talked normally from the beginning! I don’t know what to do

with this!

“After three years, a human castaway finally came to our island, and we were all determined to work hard and act like a tropical-island tribe.”

Seriously?!

“We wanted to see how the castaway might react after seeing and hearing our tribe-like dances and songs. It was certainly fantastic. Thank you so much for coming!”

“I guess I’m glad you’re glad, but I still feel really conflicted about this! I honestly thought this might be a first-contact situation!”

“Is that not a classic experience associated with this kind of island life? Well~ It was worth doing this for three years.”

I was basically just playing along with a game of pretend...

Beelzebub patted me on the shoulder. “Demons live far longer than humans. Some will want to spend a few years on fantasies like this. It causes no one else trouble since it is a desert island.”

“I got you.”

Some things still didn’t sit right with me, but I had to respond like I understood.

“Ah yes. Witch of the Highlands, you must be finished checking all the plants on this island, so why don’t I bring some specimens for you?”

The Masco Tribe, er, the yeti chief made an offer I appreciated very much.

“Oh, yes please!”

“Then please follow me.”

The chief took me to a cave outside the village. The stone door opened, revealing a room filled with documents.

“This place looks way more modern...”

“Times of emergency aside, this storage room is the only place where we are allowed to say things other than *naaa, naaa.*”

I dunno, this is getting complicated...

“Aside from playing tribe, we are also conducting biological research on these southern islands whilst living here. This is a trove of information that could not be comprehended by human nations.”

Demon progress was marching on while we weren't looking...

I received documents on the island's plants, and a sample set of all its herbs.

When I took a glance at the documents, I saw that their medicinal effects had already been described in detail...

There'd been no need for me to study these plants, had there?

When we returned to the village, the yetis were awfully excited. Too excited for it to be about us.

“Has a new castaway arrived, then?”

“It might be possible. Wait...I think I know those horns...”

There was Laika, in the middle of the yetis!

“Naaa, naaa.” “Naaa, naaa.” “Nanananaaanaaaa!”

“Um, is there anyone here who understands my language? I am searching for Azusa, Witch of the Highlands!”

Now they were confusing Laika!

“Sorry! Laika! I'm here! I'm so sorry I worried you!” I dashed toward her.

“Oh! Lady Azusa! I'm so glad you're safe!”

Laika and I hugged each other tightly.

I'm so relieved... Seriously relieved... I'm so glad I didn't worry her for an entire week or two...

“I'm sorry. It's all because I wasn't paying attention...”

“Do not apologize. Let us rejoice in our reunion, Lady Azusa!”

Oh, she is the best apprentice. I'm just gonna do it and smush my cheek on hers.

“Erm...Lady Azusa, I am happy, but...you are much too close...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! This is a special moment.”

But I made a point of stopping before she got too grumpy about it. I didn’t want to make this too big a deal.

“Indeed. I’m relieved to see this matter resolved.” Beelzebub was behind us, her arms crossed.

These little creatures had taken care of me, so I would bring my daughters along to play or something next time.

When I told Laika about the yetis, she was stunned. “Some people live strange lifestyles, indeed...”

I was honestly shocked, too.

The yetis said “Naaa, naaa,” inviting us to join a welcome party or something like that, but we respectfully declined.

I climbed onto Laika, and we headed straight back to the house in the highlands.

I had to tell the family I was okay!

When we got home, Falfa and Shalsha hugged me.

“They didn’t fall apart or anything, but they were still upset. You’re a parent; get yourself together,” Sandra scolded me, her arms crossed.

She was probably older than me, so I was being reprimanded by my elder.

“Yes, I’ll be careful...”

I reflected on the whole fiasco and reminded myself to follow the three Cs: Contact, Communication, and Consultation.



A few days later, I made some new digestive medicine.

“All right, it’s finished! These are Hiland Pills, made with care by the Witch of the Highlands! Eat too much? Heavy stomach? Take this!”

I showed Halkara the medicine. No one else besides her would be as quick to

appreciate how amazing it was.

“Wow! How splendid, Madam Teacher! What plants did you use~? They have names unfamiliar to an elf from Hrant...”

“There are some great ones in the southern islands.”

Sanshu Island, where the yetis lived, was rich with exactly the plants I needed.

They seemed to be growing everywhere there, so I got a whole big batch of them.

“It has been a long while since you last did any witch work, Madam Teacher~”

“It hasn’t been *that* long... I worry about that...”

Even though I spent a while as a castaway on a tropical island, I got my hands on some data about these plants, so all’s well that ends well.

“I also have one more: a pill... Well, it’s more like a tree nut that fights drowsiness.”

“Is it really that effective?”

Halkara took the nut and popped it in her mouth. *Oh no, you’re not supposed to eat it raw!*

The elf suddenly opened her eyes wide.

“Ahhh! It’s like there’s electricity inside my mouth! I cannot sleep like this!”

“Yeah... I was thinking about chewing on one before I need to ride Laika... It’s to make sure I don’t doze off...”

I’d lived for three hundred years in this world, but I could still grow as a person!

A WEIRDO CAME TO REPAY A FAVOR

Beelzebub was over to hang out once again.

“Yes, this tea is quite delicious, and it has fragrances that I’ve never smelled nor tasted before.”

She was elegantly enjoying her tea at the table. It was normal to treat guests when they came over, but she did so way too often.

“That tea uses leaves from the plants growing on Sanshu Island, where those yetis lived. They were drinking it.”

I should get back to Sanshu Island somehow to pick more herbs in the future. I had my responsibilities as a witch, after all.

“It is a relief that was the island where you happened to fall. We have a saying that seems relevant: *Unlucky to be injured, lucky to not be conscripted into defeating the hero.*”

Words of wisdom on the upside of an injury existed everywhere...

By the way, Beelzebub was a little different from usual today. Her wings were spread out wide.

Because of this, she didn’t place her center of gravity on the back of the chair and instead sat forward. As a result, her posture was much better.

“Why are your wings out like that today?”

“I have had a lot of work lately, so I mostly keep them folded. If I do not stretch them occasionally, they will atrophy. ’Tis just as embarrassing as letting one’s clothes go threadbare.”

“Yeah, I guess they would get in the way if you always kept them out. Even though they are flashy.”

Beelzebub’s face clouded over, maybe because she remembered something

unpleasant.

“When I keep them out, they often get caught when I close doors... The pain is distressing...”

“Yeah, that sounds rough...”

“I can use magic to hide them from view, but it is much more of a problem people believe they aren’t when they are... For example, sometimes people crash into them... It is a terrible nuisance, so I do my best to keep them folded.”

I’m sure winged demons could commiserate with plenty of these stories.

Living life as someone’s edgy, middle school OC sounded inconvenient enough.

And now that Laika had just sat down with us—

“When you and Flatorte are in your dragon forms, do you bump into things?” I asked.

If you were wondering what came of the tropical island incident, I was trying to treat Laika with extra care to atone for my sins. I poured her a cup of tea.

“No, dragons are much too big to fit through the doorways of average buildings in the first place.”

“I see... I guess you don’t really make buildings for dragon-form use only...”

Catching wings in doors sounded like a problem particular to demons.

“Well, now that I am here, I suppose I’ll do some work.” Beelzebub laid some documents on the table.

“Is it okay to take national documents out of the office? What happens if you lose them?”

“I am important, so ’tis not a problem.”

“I think it might be a problem *because* you’re important...”

“No need to worry. I would not bring any truly important documents. These are application forms for the odd-looking ones in the department. This work is trivial, so I may at least do it in comfort.”

The house in the highlands isn't a café! Well, not most days.

“What do you mean when you say ‘odd-looking ones’?” Laika asked a bit sharply. Yeah, I didn’t know, either.

“There are some demons whose appearances occasionally change dramatically. They change so much that it is incredibly difficult to tell if it’s actually them, so they must submit applications to prove who they are.” Beelzebub rustled through her documents, searching for something. “For example, this species is called balloon demons. The difference drawn here is easily visible.”

In the section marked BEFORE TRANSFORMATION on the document, there was an image of a demon who looked like a deflated ball with arms and legs attached to it, like some kind of mascot. I vaguely remembered some sumo wrestler mascot like this.

“And this is after their transformation.” Beelzebub peeled back a page on the form.

In the section marked AFTER TRANSFORMATION, there was an image of a tall, model-like demon woman.

This had a very particular energy, like *THE RESULTS OF THIS DIET WILL SHOCK YOU! SEE THESE BEFORE-AND-AFTER PICTURES FOR YOURSELF!*

“There’s no trace of that other thing anywhere here! This is a totally different person!”

“Indeed. They look like an entirely different person, so the other staff members cannot tell if their looks are simply different, or if this is indeed somebody else. That is why we need these applications,” Beelzebub smoothly explained, as if this happened all the time in the demon world. “Not only that, but there are many cases in which demons will suddenly transform. Without warning, they shrink instead of gradually growing smaller, or they change form entirely. ’Tis truly difficult to judge.”

“I see... I would most certainly be confused if the expanded version of this person submitted a résumé with that picture, then the skinny one came to the interview instead...” Laika was overcome with amazement, too. That was how

extreme the change was.

“It is a problem unique to demons. There are quite a few of them throughout all the ministries.”

I was going to scold Beelzebub for working on a weekend, but it didn't seem like that intense of a job. It looked like she was just going through and checking the applications.

“Well, just don't overwork yourself.”

“The girls are out shopping, so I have naught else to do. I have no choice but to check these documents.”

“Oh, so that's your goal...”

The twins, Falfa and Shalsha, and Sandra were out shopping.

It was about time that I let Sandra do the shopping on her own, but she seemed to simply get tired while walking. Falfa and Shalsha would carry her or hold her hand sometimes.

“I have come to appreciate how adorable Sandra is as well. If I may adopt any of them, I would be fine with Sandra, too.”

“I keep telling you, I'm not letting you adopt any of them! Find your own daughter to adopt.”

“Well, I...find it awkward to live with someone I know nothing about... 'Tis much easier with someone I know...”

She sure was naive when it came to that stuff.

—There was a knock at the door. A visitor?

“Hello~? I—I am a humble human traveler. Is anyone hooome?”

The voice outside attempted an introduction.

“A traveler? Is it someone tired who wants a rest? But Flatta's not far from here. Does this stranger really want to enter this lone house in the highlands?”

I was somewhat on my guard because information about a max-level witch *was* circulating. There were barely any nowadays, but adventurers had come by before wanting to battle the strongest witch.

“It is possible a lone traveler may have sprained an ankle, so why don’t we at least take a look and see?” Laika suggested.

Well, I would just open the door and see what they wanted. Having myself recently run into trouble on a desert island (that wasn’t actually deserted), I would do this in the spirit of helping.

“Hellooo. Who is it?”

I opened the door.

“Oh, I’m a humble, human traveler...and I got lost... Would you mind if I stayed here for a little while...?”

Standing there was a young woman, her hair in pigtails.

She did appear to be a traveler—she had what looked like a suitcase with her, after all. I was surprised those things existed in this world, actually. All it needed were the wheel parts.

The problem was that the girl had what looked like antennae and beautiful butterfly wings. Maybe she was a demon like Beelzebub.

“Um... You’re not a human, are you? I don’t know what species you are, though.”

She looked strange, so I decided to just ask.

“What?! Did she find out...? No, that can’t be! No, I am human. See, I’m just human all over! See, see?!”

Her wings and antennae were literally wiggling as she spoke!

Anyway, a weird girl was here now.

Hmmm... I wanted to show kindness to someone in trouble, but I could tell she was going to be another handful...

“I got lost... I’m sorry, but may I use your lodgings? To be more specific, for eight days and seven nights?”

That’s a long time! What is this, Airbnb?!

“I know you’re lost, but you should be able to see the village of Flatta at the bottom of the slope. They have inns there. There have been a lot more tourists

lately, so there are even nicer accommodations now. One even has a hot spring, so I think that'd be a nice place to stay."

"Oh...actually...my kin are forbidden from ever going to the village of Flatta... That's, well...because we'll drown if we go there!"

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She was shameless!

I'd be stunned if any of that turned out to be true!

"You'll *drown*...? There aren't any lakes or ponds in Flatta, though."

"No, I'm certain there must be puddles there... They're surprisingly dangerous... You can drown even in a little water..."

By that logic, a rock might fall from the sky, so one shouldn't go outside. I didn't know how to respond...

"And, um...I may have injured my leg... It's so bad that I must stay here for seven nights..."

She was *really* into the idea of staying here for seven nights!

"Please hold on a moment. I'm going to talk about this with my family."

I smiled at her, shut the door, and immediately went to talk with Laika and Beelzebub.

"So what is she...?"

"I was watching it all from behind. She is quite the suspicious character..."

"I only heard her voice, but...I believe she is completely harmless. At the very least, I did not get the impression that she is a bad person."

"Yeah, I agree."

"She may be a handful to deal with, however."

"Yeah, I agree with that, too... That's why I don't want to do this..."

Letting trouble stay at our house wasn't going to change anything.

"The yetis took care of you, so why not allow her to stay for at least one night?"

Oops... Now that she brought that up, it was hard to refuse...

"But she doesn't want to stay for one night. She wants to stay for seven."

"How brazen of her..." Even Beelzebub was appalled by that.

"I trust that she's harmless, but there are little kids living here..."

Then I came up with a plan.

“Okay, then, Beelzebub, could you take care of the three girls for a week? Sorry it’s so sudden—”

“Very well.”

The answer came quickly. I thought she might jump at it, and I was right!

“I know you probably have a lot of work, so is it really okay? You don’t have to force—”

“The girls are more important than my job!!”

She didn’t even finish listening to what I had to say. It was a fair argument, but there was something that still didn’t sit right with me...

“The Ministry of Agriculture has childcare facilities, and I can use my PTO! I can even just let them play in my office! I shall do it!”

This was the first time in a long while that I’d seen Beelzebub so excited.

Still, the mission was a success.

The strategy was to let the three girls stay with Beelzebub, earning her gratitude, while reducing the risk of letting this strange girl stay at our house.

I highly doubted she had plans to attack us, but I would put the girls somewhere safe just in case. Sandra, especially, was a mandragora, so it was hard to say that someone who knew her worth wouldn’t abduct her.

We reached an agreement, then.

“Beelzebub, take care of—”

“Miss Beelzebub already gathered up her things and left through the back door. She is apparently going to Flatta to meet up with the girls.”

Beelzebub was way too skilled at this.

I went back to the front door and opened it. “All right, you can use one of our empty rooms. I’m afraid we won’t be able to do much else for you, though.”

“Th-th-thank you!” Her butterfly-like wings fluttered. She had no intention of hiding them anymore, did she...?

“You don’t need to take care of me at all! You don’t even need to clean up after me! I will make sure everything is just as neat as I found it! Please do not peek into my room! If you do, this whole surprise will be for nothing!”

This girl sure could talk!

And I had a feeling she was showing her hand...

This reminded me of that tale The Crane Repays a Debt...

That said, this girl definitely wasn’t a crane. Who ever heard of a crane with butterfly wings?

“Come in, come in.”

“Thank you!”

Our guest slowly closed the door—and caught her wings in them.

“Ah! Shoot! I bent my wing! I messed up!”

She even mentioned her wings herself!



The visitor first introduced herself to me and Laika.

“My name is Nosonia. As you can see, I am a traveler, and I hurt my leg a little when I was walking nearby... I could barely take a step, so I decided I needed to stay somewhere for seven nights.”

She sure was emphasizing the *seven nights* thing.

“I am Laika, the red dragon. Say, even if your leg is injured, can you not fly with your wings?”

“Ha, ah-ha-ha-ha... Well, I am sure a dragon could fly, but I’m just a normal human. Good one~! Ha-ha-ha...”

I just wished she would tell us exactly what she was already, but I guess she was planning to keep it to herself at any cost.

“I’m Azusa, the witch. I’ll knock on your door when it’s mealtime, so come out whenever you’re ready and presentable. Is that okay?”

“Yes, Miss Azusa! Thank you so much! That is exactly what I want! I promise I

will clean the room and leave it even more spotless than when I came!”

She was all talk, wasn’t she?

I took this Nosonia girl to an empty room. We had plenty of space, so we could deal with these situations immediately.

“Yes! This is excellent! I will work hard! Yes!”

The only thing I understood was that she was way into whatever she was doing.

“Work? Are you doing something here, then?”

“Um... Well, it’s work I can do anywhere so long as I have time... See, I’m a freelance writer... That’s all...”

“You have a lot of *stuff* for a writer.”

Her suitcase-looking thing was clearly massive. It was the right size for an adult to go traveling for three weeks, not just one.

“That’s...um...reference material! My reference books are very heavy! Yes, that’s right!”

Pressing her any further would just have made me feel bad.

Something was going to happen in a week, but I decided to just wait until then.

Even so, I realized The Crane Repays a Debt was a ridiculous story when you sat down and thought about it.

I mean, the crane that came to repay its debt suddenly appeared and asked the old man if she could stay... Someone would have to be *really* nice to let an uninvited guest stay like that...

There was also the part where she would get upset if the old man or the old woman saw her. If it bothered her so much, she should’ve just made the thing first, then paid them a visit to deliver it... For someone repaying a favor, she sure was selfish...

Well, it’s useless pointing out fallacies in old folktales. Now that I was experiencing it in real life, though, it really was ridiculous for a total stranger to

ask to stay at someone's house.

"Um, who is the butterfly girl...?" Laika asked when I returned to the dining room.

"You don't know, either? I've got nothing."

"At first, I thought she might be a fairy or a sprite."

Oh, a sprite. I see! That's cute; I like that!

"But fairies are supposed to be much smaller... The biggest would only be about Falfa's or Shalsha's size. She is much too tall..."

"Yeah, and her footsteps were way too heavy for either a sprite or a fairy... I could see a fairy being a little featherbrained like her, though. She reminds me of Halkara."

"Now that you mention it, I have heard that elves are a race that branched off from fairies. The story is more akin to myth, however, so I am uncertain of the details."

"Oh yeah, I can see that..."

If someone told me Halkara was just a big fairy, I'd believe them.

I could also kind of understand the explanation that the biggest fairies turned into elves.

I bet if I asked Nintan, one of the gods in this world, about that stuff, she would tell me. Having a god explain it felt like breaking the rules somehow, though.

"By the way, Lady Azusa, there is something I would like to ask," Laika began somewhat reluctantly. "Did you ever help a butterfly in the past?"

"What?! You're thinking this is a repay-a-favor kind of deal?!"

Given that this was a fantasy world, I couldn't say it was impossible.

"Well, I wouldn't say for sure that it is. It sounds more like a fairy tale. However, when I look at this Nosonia person, I believe it might be possible..."

Right. I guess it was a little childish in this world, too, for animals to repay favors...

“I don’t remember anything like that. I don’t get the opportunity to save butterflies very often anyway.”

In fact, the only situation I could think of in which a human would save a butterfly was if it was trapped in a spider’s web.

But that’s a very butterfly-centric perspective. From the spider’s point of view, it’d lose the food it worked so hard to capture. If I were the spider, I’d want to complain, *Fine, YOU live without eating any animals or plants! This is discrimination!*

Which was why I probably hadn’t saved any butterflies from spiderwebs.

“Well, it will all be clear in a week. We will wait until then,” Laika suggested leisurely.

Nosonia was a bit of an idiot, so we didn’t need to be that leery of her.

“What if we went over and opened her door right away? What do you think would happen?”

The desire to cause mischief budded inside me.

“Lady Azusa, please don’t...”

The girl, such as she was, was working hard on something up there.

At that point, Flatorte came in with heavy eyes. I guess she’d been sleeping in her room. “Mistress, I heard a lot of noise coming from one of the empty rooms. I tried to open the door, but it was locked. Is something going on?”

Oh no! She almost looked!

At least Nosonia was also being careful and locked the door. What a relief.

I told Flatorte about Nosonia. Flatorte could be irresponsible sometimes, but she did listen earnestly to what I had to say.

“Rest easy, Mistress. I, Flatorte, have no interest in her, so I won’t be looking in her room.”

“You could’ve phrased that a little more nicely.”

It was dinnertime, so I went to go knock on Nosonia’s door.

“There’s more info on the door here...”

*A helping hand
to fly into the future*
**THE NOSONIA
PROJECT**

*Authorized
Personnel Only*

There was a strange paper plastered to the door. This was like a company running out of a single room in a multipurpose building.

What on earth was she doing? If she was conducting business, I was going to start asking for rent.

I knocked. “Hey there, food’s almost ready~ Come down when you’re free~”

“I’ll go when I come to a good stopping point!”

I could hear her voice from inside the room. Was I a mom interrupting a kid playing video games to tell her that food was ready...?

“Boy, someone tried to open the door a little earlier, and I was so surprised that I thought my wings would fall off~! I was right to lock the door~”

“Oh right, so you *do* have wings.”

“No...it’s a proverb! A proverb, you know! I’m just a normal human! An extremely ordinary human!”

I felt like she already had more energy than a regular human ever could.

Also, she’d mentioned “good stopping point,” so that probably meant she was making something after all.

Ten minutes later, Nosonia emerged from her room just as Halkara was returning home from the factory. It would be best to have them introduce themselves.

“—So apparently, she’s going to stay with us for a week while she’s traveling.”

I gave Halkara the official statement just as it had been fed to me.

Nosonia definitely had something else going on, but it wouldn’t be fair to mention that right now.

“I see~ My name is Halkara, president of Halkara Pharmaceuticals.”

Halkara presented something like a business card to Nosonia. It was a very Japanese gesture.

“Oh, I am Nosonia, representative of the Nosonia Project. It is a pleasure to meet you!”

Nosonia produced her own approximation of a business card.

So she was lying about being a traveler... If I called her out on it, though, she would probably just brush it off with a random excuse like *Oh, I’ve just turned it into my own business and work freelance now.*

“Well, since we have a guest, why don’t we open a bottle of the good alcohol?!” Halkara was determined to drink. It was like she was looking for excuses...

Nosonia, however, seemed to be reserved when it came to these matters.

“I’m sorry. I only need some vegetables...”

Oh, she was rather humble.

“That won’t fill you up,” I said. “Plus, I want to give you more than just salad. Please eat as you normally would.”

“Oh, no, I’m not trying to be considerate... My kind generally only eat plants—which is a joke, and actually, I’m in the middle of a pilgrimage, so I can’t eat meat! That’s right! I’m not allowed to eat meat! Because I’m on a pilgrimage! For religious reasons!”

Even if you did think up a good excuse while talking, you didn’t have to say it twice!

“By the way, Miss Nosonia, your wings are very pretty~!” Halkara casually complimented her wings with no ulterior motive whatsoever.

“Oh, see, I always make sure to take good care of them—ha-ha, only kidding... Can you see the wings? My great-great-great-grandmother’s dying words mentioned that some winged creature was acting as my family’s guardian spirit and that people who are especially sensitive can see them. How strange, truly! Well, I didn’t really believe it myself, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha~!”

Her efforts to brush this off were incredible.

“You got no guardian spirit or anything with you,” Rosalie, our real ghost, pointed out.

“Oh, what? Then the guardian spirit must be a superstition~! It must be~! It’s so hard to believe in spirits and such, isn’t it? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

“I’m a ghost, though...”

Watching her constantly digging her own grave was something new at least, so I just let her keep at it. She was going to ruin herself the more she talked...

“Oh, you’re a ghost... My apologies... Oh! Just because you’re a ghost, you can’t go looking in my room, okay? Please, I’m begging you! Please don’t think you’re free to come in just because you can float through doors!”

“I’m not gonna go peeking into other people’s rooms. I can go through walls, but I’m always careful about it.”

I see. Even though Rosalie could pass through most barriers, that meant she

had to consider her path in order to preserve other people's privacy... Ghosts had a lot to think about...

"The only thing rotten about me is my body!"

That was probably a ghost joke, but was it okay to laugh?

"My apologies, Miss Rosalie. I'm not doubting you, but considering my circumstances, there are a couple of things I'd rather not have other people know about me. That is why I don't want others looking in my room. It might cause trouble, so..."

"Hey, that sounded kinda cool!"

Nosonia's warning seemed chivalrous, but if she was keeping terrible secrets, I wasn't sure I wanted to let her stay at all... She was probably just saying whatever came to mind, though.

I clapped my hands together. "All right. It's time for food. Can you have bread, Nosonia?"

"I can't not have it."

It *was* hard to imagine a butterfly munching on meat.

"All right. Then if your bread and salad aren't enough, feel free to take seconds."

"Of course. Oh right. Also, I have a request." Nosonia produced what looked like a measuring tape. "Would you allow me to measure everyone's figure?"

"You're gonna make clothes, aren't you?"

Wouldn't it be better to just say everything outright? Then there wouldn't be that weird tension...

"N-no... See, I...like measuring people... That's all..."

Her excuses were getting so careless! That was an *extremely* niche hobby!

I raged a little on the inside when she was measuring Halkara.

"Wow, Miss Halkara, your bust measurement is incredible~!"

"You may be right. All the nutrients from my food go to my chest~"

Was there no spell that made all the nutrients from my food go to my chest?

When we were done eating, everyone except Nosonia stayed at the table to have tea.

We weren't excluding her because she was a freeloader or anything—she insisted she had something to do in her room and went back to it. It didn't exactly feel right making her stay to have tea with us, so we just let her do as she pleased.

Plus, it would be harder to talk about her if she was around.

"What sort of species is she, I wonder? She is not a fairy," Halkara said as she sipped on some tea that was a little spiked.

"So she isn't a fairy, huh?"

"No. Elves and fairies have relatively deep connections, and they even send delegations to the Wellbranch Marquessate sometimes." Halkara seemed to know a lot about fairies.

"Where do they live? I don't think I've ever seen one."

I'd never seen one, but after three hundred years, it felt like I should have at some point.

Then again, I rarely left the area around the house in the highlands.

"Not only are they small, but their sphere of habitation is tiny. They cluster only in certain places in certain forests. That is why, if you don't know exactly where to go, you might never see a fairy."

"Like around one specific tree in one specific forest, right?"

Halkara nodded, her face flushed with alcohol. "That's exactly it. They're like smaller, more compact versions of elves. The majority of us elves tend to live crowded in one place, too. You don't find us just anywhere in any forest, do you?"

That made it easy to understand. It was like how the better half of Japan's land was mountains and forests, but that didn't mean there were people doing forestry work on every mountain.

“Then what is Nosonia, seriously?” I asked, munching on an edible slime.

The conversation had reached the inevitable question.

“Mistress, she’ll tell you in a week, right? Then you just have to wait.” Flatorte sounded genuinely apathetic... “I’m not interested in fighting her to see which of us is stronger, and if she’s harmless, she can stay as long as she wants, as far as I’m concerned.”

Everything was sparring with her...

I wanted to fill out this hot topic a little more. Freeloaders almost never dropped by—although I wouldn’t want them coming all the time.

“Well, she’s got wings like Beelzebub does, so they’re probably related.”

Flatorte was sharp when it came to the weirdest things. She was an idiot, but that was because she never studied. Her street smarts weren’t half-bad.

“Oh yeah... Then is she a demon...?”

That was my natural conclusion.

“But Lady Azusa, I get the impression she genuinely intends to repay a favor to you. You would remember saving someone like her, no...?”

“Yeah, I totally agree, Laika...”

I hadn’t met any demons for a long time in my memory. Beelzebub had to be the first. A demon could have come by incognito, but I wouldn’t forget helping a girl like her.

“After living a relatively uneventful life for three hundred years—not to brag or anything—I’m sure I would remember caring for an injured person.”

I really didn’t mean to brag. There was a saying that went *Working the fields in fine weather, at home reading when it rains*, and that was exactly how my life was.

When it was sunny, I went out to collect herbs or kill slimes. When it rained, I read books about magic or killed slimes nearby. My life stuck to a routine—a routine that most often involved killing slimes.

The normal people of this world often asked me if I grew tired of it or felt like

dying from boredom sometimes. The people of Flatta don't ask me that anymore, of course, but they used to.

I'll just jump to the point and say I didn't.

I doubted there were any humans who could master different fields within their average lifespan. Many of them could never even master one.

In a way, the things I could do were practically limitless.

A couple of centuries was nothing.

If people were bored to death just because they lived a long time, then all the elves and demons and spirits would exist in constant despair. But of course, that wasn't the case.

"Well, she doesn't seem like a bad person, so I'm certain it'll be fine. She even followed proper etiquette when we exchanged cards," Halkara said. I let Nosonia stay because she didn't seem bad, but an endorsement from Halkara only lowered my confidence...

We chatted a little more but were unable to reach a conclusion as to what exactly Nosonia was.

If she were a crane, we would probably have heard the *thunk, whum* sound of her weaving.

The next day, Nosonia came down for breakfast like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Good morning! My leg still hurts, so please allow me to stay the next six nights! I believe it'll get better if I stay put for six nights!"

"Sure, do what you like."

You can concentrate on your work as hard as you want.

"Um, also, are there any other people who live here? If there are, would you please tell me what size they wear?"

"Sure, I'll bring my daughters' clothes over. You can probably tell their sizes from that."

—Then at nine AM.

Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam! Diiing, diing, diing! Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom!

There was a cacophony coming from Nosonia's room!

"What is happening?!"

Everyone in the house gathered in front of it, me included.

Flatorte banged on the door. "Hey, keep it down! It sounds like you're doing construction in there!"

"I'm sorryyy! I will be done in a few days! Please forgive me!" Nosonia called back. Was she seriously making some kind of robot in there...?

Then, I could faintly hear a knock coming from the front door. Had the sound of her working persisted, I might have missed it.

—*Knock, knock, knock, knock.*

What? Who's here now...?

I wasn't the only one who froze at the sound—everyone did.

There was no doubt that Nosonia was making something. If all this obnoxious noise was just her travelogue, I would be very surprised.

But I wasn't expecting someone *else* to show up.

"Hello? Is anyone home?"

Someone was definitely here. We all exchanged glances.

"It would be frightening if someone who looked exactly like Miss Nosonia came asking to borrow a room, wouldn't it...?" Laika raised an eerie possibility.

"Hey, Laika! I don't like scary stories... I don't mind lending out rooms to weird people, but no scary stuff!"

That said, I couldn't just ignore the door, so I cautiously answered it.

There stood a single demon holding several parcels.

I recognized our visitor as a demon right away because of the horns.

Don't tell me Nosonia was a wanted woman who was now being arrested...? I hoped she wasn't forging weapons in her room.

“We have some packages addressed to one Nosonia. Is this the correct place?”

Oh, a delivery person. I could tell from the wyvern waiting on the lawn.

“Yes... She is here...”

“There are a lot of boxes, but all of them are light. May I leave them just inside your door?”

“Oh, sure. Go ahead...”

After putting all the packages down, the delivery demon left. At least now I knew the human lands fell within their delivery range...

Written on the packages, by the way, were things like this:

- Fabric
- Cotton
- Buttons, *etc.*

She was definitely making some kind of garment!

I left the boxes outside Nosonia’s room. “There are some packages here for you!” I called.

“Thank you! They were so bulky, I couldn’t bring all of them~”

Her traveler facade was slipping.

For the next few days, Nosonia’s room emitted a constant stream of noise pollution.

“How are you doing? Is your leg healing?” Laika, being kind, was playing along with Nosonia’s lie.

“Yes, this is almost complete! Now I’ll be able to repa— Oh yes~! It’s gotten much better, but it still aches a little~”

Maybe she should have practiced her lying before she started worrying about repaying me...



Then finally, it was the promised eighth morning after the seventh night.

Nosonia was beaming with the contentment of a good worker. A professional, even.

“Thank you so much for letting me stay a whole seven nights. My work should be entirely finished in just a few more hours! Rest easy, because I will not be making any more loud noises!”

“Right, your leg will be fully healed in a few more hours. That’s good to hear.”

“Oh... Yes, right! It was my leg, my leg! Then I will be able to get back to traveling!”

At noon, Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra returned with Beelzebub.

Falfa made a beeline for me, Shalsha followed a little after, and Sandra was somewhat hesitant, but they all came to me eventually. I crouched down to hug each of them—it was a mother’s duty and privilege.

“Did you have a good week, Mommy?”

“That’s what I want to ask you. You didn’t get sick or anything while you were in the demon lands, did you?”

Behind them, Beelzebub complained, “What a rude thing for you to say. I thoroughly spoiled them.” But was that good for them?

“It felt like going home. It was nice,” Sandra said, her face red in embarrassment.

“Oh yeah, Beelzebub’s garden is kind of like your hometown for you, isn’t it?”

“*Let your precious children travel.* That is a proverb they use in the north.” Shalsha just called herself precious—and she was absolutely right.

“Yes, Shalsha, you are precious. I love you so much!”

Yes, it was a truly touching reunion! A happy ending!

“—By the way, Azusa. Is your guest still here?”

Oh right, almost forgot about her.

“Nosonia’s here. She’s apparently just about to leave.”

“I see. Perhaps we may finally learn what she is.”

The truth about Nosonia would finally be revealed!

“Although, to be honest, I care not what the answer to this mystery is.”

“Don’t say that!”

“’Tis far more important to treat the girls with affection~ Oh~ You are all so cute~ You could stay for a hundred years if you want~ A week is much too short~”

This demon was much too *greedy*.

Beelzebub was fawning all over my daughters. If Falfa told Beelzebub to commit a crime, I think she’d actually do it. It was a groundless fear, though, since Falfa would never say such a thing.

While we were talking, Nosonia flew straight toward us. Literally. Using her wings.

“Miss Azusa, it’s all finished~!”

“Well, now that’s not a demon one sees every day,” Beelzebub commented, laying that question to rest.

But more importantly, I was going to find out why exactly Nosonia had been holing herself up in her room.

“What did you finish, Nosonia?”

“There is a lot of it, so would you mind coming to the room?”

We went to Nosonia’s room—

—and found several weaving machines and completed garments.

“Miss Azusa, thank you so much for saving my life back then! This is a silk robe of the highest quality! I made it to combine both witchiness and luxury!”

“Oh wow! Thank you!”

It was more perfect than I could have imagined!

“I was actually keeping this a secret from everybody, but I was lying when I said I’d hurt my leg and was unable to move. I couldn’t create my thank-you gift without knowing your sizes, so I stayed with you.”

“.....Oh wow. I had no idea,” I deadpanned.

“I made clothes for everyone else, too! For the children, I made socks that will withstand years of outdoor play and never wear through and nice dresses for going out!”

The girls’ eyes glittered!

“I don’t know who you are, but thank you, Miss!”

“I must express my deepest feelings of gratitude, strange traveler.”

“...Th-thanks. Dunno who you are, though.”

She really was a stranger in the three girls’ eyes.

After that, Nosonia presented us with all sorts of other cloth gifts, including down quilts and superabsorbent towels.

“Wow, thank you so much. I feel bad you made all this for us...”

“I am also relieved I have successfully repaid my debt to you!”

Oh yeah. I still didn’t have an answer for that.

“When was it that I saved you?”

I tried to think of a moment where I’d rescued someone with wings, but it didn’t even ring a bell.

“What? Don’t you remember? It was about two hundred and thirty years ago.”

“Of course I’d forget something that happened so long ago.”

It was like asking someone in the 2000s to remember something that happened in the 1700s.

“But you picked me up when I was about to drown...” The girl looked somewhat disappointed.

When was it, really? I did genuinely want to know. I didn’t think I’d ever forget saving someone so unique.

“It was at the village at the bottom of the slope—Flatta, was it? My parents disguised themselves and were traveling on a pilgrimage.”

So the lie about being a traveling pilgrim wasn't entirely baseless...

"But I was only this big back then." Nosonia put a little space between her thumb and index finger to indicate the length.

That was three inches!

"That's tiny! Fairy-size! No, hold on... I wouldn't forget an experience like that! I would totally remember a meeting like that!"

"I am certain she looked different back then," Beelzebub said in quiet exasperation. Guess our local demon friend had already worked it out.

"Yes, yes. Back then, I... Ummm, I have a picture of me from my early childhood—"

Nosonia took out a sketchbook that was probably full of designs for her clothes.

"Here!"

The picture she showed us was of a green, wriggly butterfly larva.

"Now *that's* a crazy transformation!"

"She's a crawler. Immature crawlers are indistinguishable from caterpillar larvae. They grow bigger and bigger until they come to be about our height, which is when they take on their winged form." Beelzebub explained their growth cycle to us.

How was I supposed to know any of that...?

The name *crawler* probably came from the big caterpillar stage.

"Back then, my parents went shopping and left me on top of a leaf, but I lost my balance, fell off the leaf, and landed in a puddle..."

The made-up story about drowning in Flatta also had its origins in truth, huh?

"I thought it was all over for me. That little puddle might as well have been a vast ocean... But then Miss Azusa passed by and used a torn leaf to save me!" Nosonia looked at me, her eyes wet with tears.

But I still couldn't remember. It wasn't a situation peculiar enough for me to recall...

“I still cannot forget what you said back then. *‘I don’t really want to touch a caterpillar, so I’ll just use a leaf...’*”

That was kind of a mean thing to say, though!

“It was thanks to you that I reached adulthood fifty years ago, safe and sound. I then started up my own individual firm in the garment business and managed to become independent, so I used this opportunity to repay you!”

“I see. I don’t remember it at all, but I don’t doubt I did something like that.”

I could see myself sparing a benevolent act for her. Had she been some sort of spiky, creepy-crawly, though, I might’ve ignored her.

“Ever since, I’ve trained to use spider and other types of silk, down, and every fiber imaginable so I can create the most comfortable clothing ever. It is a privilege to have shown you just a bit of the results of my hard work!”

There was a saying that went *Even the tiniest insects have great wills*, and I guess bugs could grow really big.

Rosalie was bawling, “What a nice story...” But it wasn’t exactly a tearjerker to me. I probably just felt like I’d saved a bug...

Still, even the smallest good deeds are worth doing.

Well, now that I knew the circumstances behind the favor she owed—

“Why don’t we throw a party? We have plenty of time until evening if we get started now.” I headed straight for the kitchen. “The girls are back now, and you’ll be leaving after this, right, Nosonia? Why don’t we finish this off with a closing celebration?”

“What?! Is that all right? I feel as though we’re even at the moment, but then I’ll owe you again!”

Maybe she felt like she’d finally settled a debt...

“Sandra, could you use that good sense of yours to gather up a bunch of tasty vegetables? And could you get some good flower nectar if there is any, too?”

“I can do that. I know what insects like, more or less.” Sandra was reliable in times like these. “I’ve seen the hardship of plants that have suffered because of

insects...”

There was another natural enemy of hers here, too!

“Ha-ha-ha~! Looking at a mandragora girl makes me want to nibble on her a little bit~ I just soometimes feel like taking a little bite, that’s all.”

She wanted to eat her? This was dangerous...

I was right to send Sandra off to Beelzebub’s place.

After that, we efficiently prepared for the party.

“““Cheeeers!”””

Everyone clinked their cups together.

Nosonia downed her drink, which was made from the flower nectar that Sandra had collected.

“Ahhhh~! Delicious! Nothing like nectar after finishing a job!”

I guess nectar would be a big hit with a butterfly. No surprises there.

“Hey, Nosonia, is it still okay to call you and your people ‘crawlers’ even after you grow up?”

The name *crawler* suggested they would...well, crawl, but that wasn’t a butterfly’s preferred method of travel.

“Yes. From what I’ve heard, we are most remembered for that phase of life, so that is what we’re called. Also, we tire easily from flying, so we mostly walk everywhere.”

I see... I guess butterflies didn’t journey as far afield as birds...

“But it still doesn’t seem right calling you that when you’re a child, even if you are the size of a regular butterfly larva.”

“Yes, we do grow very rapidly, after all. Two years after you saved me from drowning, I was about seven feet long.”

“That’s massive! You’d be pretty hard to miss!”

“It wasn’t very easy getting from place to place, so I mostly stayed at home. Other crawlers do the same, apparently, so I don’t think you’d ever see them

out and about in a demon town.”

Nosonia’s parents probably wouldn’t be able to take her on trips once she was that big. I guess I really did happen to meet her at some point. Fate works in mysterious ways, as they say, bringing people together.

During the festivities, I could feel Laika staring at me.

“Hmm? What is it, Laika?”

“You have been living so benevolently for over two hundred years, Lady Azusa. It reminded me that I still have much to learn from you.”

“Oh, no, no! You’re praising me too much! It was really just a little thing!”

Anyone would save a bug if they lived long enough.

“But you indeed saved her,” Beelzebub commented as she worked on her food. “You are allowed to be genuinely proud of that.” She wasn’t the type to be modest herself, and she was basically a quasi-member of the family already.

“You might be right.”

I wasn’t planning on getting a big head from this. I was just genuinely happy that I formed a new relationship by getting involved.

Shalsha and Sandra went up to Nosonia and started asking all sorts of questions.

I wanted the children to treasure every interaction they had.

“Please tell me about the livelihood of a crawler.”

“What kind of grass do crawlers like best? I want to know more about bugs so I can protect myself.”

“We wake up in the morning and go to bed at night. We like almost every kind of grass,” Nosonia replied.

Well, that was uninformative...

Also, Nosonia’s expression was brighter than it had been before. She was probably extra bold because now she had nothing to hide.

I was happy to receive the clothes, but connecting with a new friend like this

was the best reward I could have gotten.

“Nosonia, it’s nighttime already. Why don’t you stay another night?”

“Thank you, but I still have a company to run and lots of work waiting for me. I must return as quickly as possible.”

Ahhh, so this girl had become a proud, working member of society.

A child I had saved came back as an upstanding adult—what an encouraging thought.

“Oh, I understand that. Running a company is such hard work~” President Halkara interjected.

“It is. There are so many things to worry about~”

The two executives are about to launch into a lively conversation, I see.

One hour later...

“Ooh, I feel terrible... I can barely hold my liquor as it is, and I ended up drinking so much...”

“You, too, Miss Nosonia...? I have gone way over the top...”

Nosonia and Halkara were both pale and slumped together, like good friends.

“This has to be one of the hardest parts about running your own business, isn’t it, Miss Halkara...?”

“Sure is, Miss Nosonia...”

This definitely had nothing to do with being a company president.

“Oh, Miss Azusa, Miss Azusa...” Nosonia extended a shaky hand and called to me. “I am terribly sorry, but I don’t think I can move right now. Please allow me to stay for one more night...”

“Yeah, sure, take your time...”

The next morning, Nosonia hurried on home.

THE DEMONS STARTED STREAMING

Beelzebub came over to the house in the highlands that day.

Well, she came just about every day these days, so that wasn't particularly noteworthy.

When she arrived, though, she was a little restless, as if she had come to deliver some bad news.

"I suppose I have some information I ought to bring to your attention. That is why I have come to tell you myself."

"I feel like you didn't need to tell us that you're here to tell us yourself, but I guess you're a minister."

This minister, however, was being a bit too casual about her work.

"And what is it you want us to know? I think there's about a forty percent chance that Pecora's involved."

Beelzebub nodded. "Yes, Her Majesty is indeed involved..."

What is she planning now?

I only knew that Pecora was the cause, but whatever it was, it would affect us. I had to calm my nerves.

"Well, why don't you pour us some tea first? I shall explain as we drink."

"...You're kinda arrogant, you know that?"

Oh, might as well. I could make a good pot using the herbs I got on that desert (-ish) island.

I prepared the tea, and we decided to chat in the dining room.

"Ahhh, 'tis always so bitter and sharp. One must drink slowly, but I suppose something like this every once in a while may not be so bad."

“I made this tea for you, so please just compliment me like a normal person... So what’s Pecora up to now? A national idol tour?”

Pecora did idol work every so often.

It was clearly supposed to be a joke at first, but then she ended up with enough fans that Pecora herself started taking it seriously. I guess you never know when a joke might turn into something bigger.

She was the demon king, so she could do whatever she wanted so long as she stayed in the demon world. If her antics spread to the human world, though, things might get a little complicated.

“Close. You almost got it. But not quite.”

Close, but no cigar... I had a bad feeling about this.

“She used the magic technology from those ghosts in the Thursa Thursa Kingdom again.”

“Geez, so Pecora herself is the one using it for evil deeds, huh...?”

I wasn’t sure what exactly she was up to, but she was going to use it on us somehow... Bet she was letting the other demons try it first so she could see how they fared with it.

Pondeli, for example, built her arcade using the ancient magic.

I’m glad the world was peaceful enough that they didn’t immediately use it to make weapons, but this place was unbelievably chill...

“Her Majesty discovered something most fascinating within the ancient magic... We predict she will use that to prank—er, to play with you.”

No, you definitely said prank.

“This is confidential, by the way, so I cannot say exactly what it is, but something will happen to make it seem like Her Majesty is here but at the same time not. Please do not start panicking.”

“Well, that’s awfully vague...”

I was sure I’d figure out what she meant eventually, but I really wanted the specifics now.

“It is harmless magic, so rest easy. Please know Her Majesty has acted arbitrarily and without consultation. We claim no responsibility for this, so please do not file any complaints to us, instead directing them to Her Majesty herself. That is all.”

I guess Beelzebub was here to cover her own butt...

She'd made an outright declaration that she bore no responsibility even though she hadn't even really told me what Pecora was up to.

“And where are the girls?”

So that's what she's after.

“Probably running around in the nearby field. Falfa ran off with Sandra on her back.”

“Right. Then I suppose I shall go search for them.” Beelzebub stood up, letting me know the conversation was finished, then left the house. She sure was busy.

And there was still two-thirds of the herb tea left in her cup...

“Did she really not like it...?”

Couldn't she at least pretend to accept my hospitality?

When Beelzebub found the girls, she apparently ran around the hills and fields with them. Falfa told me about it later.

“Miss Beelzebub played a lot with us~! ♪”

“I see, I see! That's great~!”

Beelzebub wouldn't be a bad influence on my daughters, so I had no complaints.

“And she talked about a new test that uses ancient magic.”

Oh, Shalsha's testimony could be very valuable.

“What? But she didn't tell you the details, did she?”

“She said they were planning on using phantasms. Ancient magic sometimes uses phantasms for communication. Replicating that ability became possible using the artifacts remaining in the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.”

She told them so much!

“Beelzebub said she couldn’t tell us any more, but when Falfa begged her, she gave in instantly,” Sandra explained. Beelzebub was way too soft on the girls.

But what did she mean by “using phantasms for communication”?

We wouldn’t know until Pecora played her trick.

“I think she said they’re gonna do something called streeming~! ♪”

“Streeming”?

Does she mean streaming?

Hold on, that was impossible in a fantasy world...but after everything I’d seen here...

They’d even managed to make claw machines... I wouldn’t be surprised no matter what happened now.

Anyway...we just had to wait until Pecora made her move...



After Beelzebub’s warning, we heard nothing of Pecora’s trick for a good, long, peaceful while.

“Hey, Laika, do you have more meat than me?”

“Of course not. I cut them by measuring their weight properly.”

The greatest disturbance to the peace was Laika and Flatorte arguing over their meat portions for dinner.

“Azusa, here’s a souvenir from a trip I went on with some other spirits~ It’s a mask that gives you a funny face when you put it on.”

“Momma Yufufu, you’re really bad at picking out souvenirs...”

The only other thing worth mentioning was that Momma Yufufu dropped by to give me a souvenir.

Not so long ago, I had battled a god, so maybe this leisure was the world’s way of balancing out that extraordinary experience.

Finally, though, the shoe dropped in the midst of those extraordinarily

ordinary days.

After warming myself up in the bath, I went into my room.

“Phew, that was nice~”

The only thing left to do today was sleep. Maybe I’d read a little before that.

—That was when a long, horizontal, video-like image appeared on the wall opposite my bed.

“What is this? It’s like watching a movie on a home projector...”

The video was showing someone’s room. There were stuffed animals everywhere, so it was probably safe to say it was a girl’s room. Was this a spell that showed illusions?

Something entered the shot—a face, very close-up.

“Right, is it working? Yes, it looks okay.”

I could hear a voice.

The face pulled back, until I could see exactly who it was.

“This is Pecora!”

“Hello everyone, greetings! I am the demon king, Provato Pecora Ariés! I’ve decided to start streaming from now on~! I hope you’ll stick around with me!”

Pecora stood in the middle of the screen, waving.

“She literally meant *streaming*!”

What was she, a YouTuber...?

“Now, some of you might find this a little startling~ I am using a certain kind of spell to show this phantasm to everyone~ Isn’t this incredible~? But I can’t share my trade secrets~!”

They were using ancient magic for the weirdest things again...

“See, I’m the demon king, right? It’s a very important job, but it’s hard to go out and see everyone when you’re important. That’s also why I believe I should be communicating with you all as much as possible. This is a government for the people, no?”

She said all that kind of stuff.

“Although, a government for the people can turn into a mobocracy.”

“Can she say that? I feel like she’s putting her foot in her mouth there.”

It wasn’t like the demons could kick her out of office anyway...

“And so starting today, I’m hoping to bring the real voice of the demon king, Pecora, straight to you! If you like my content, then please share and subscribe!”



Channel subscriptions...she really *was* like a YouTuber...

But then I realized something. I hadn't clicked anything to play the video.

I didn't even have a PC or phone, after all. There was nothing *to* click.

Basically, the phantasm was being forcibly broadcast in my room.

"How am I supposed to stop or turn this off...?"

Less importantly (but still annoying), it was so loud! My head was rattling!

"Turn it down! I can't change the volume or mute you from my end, and it's hurting my ears!"

Since the video was being broadcast by magic on her end, I had no way to turn it off.

"Oh, the volume might be a little loud~..."

Streamer seemed to be aware of it.

"This won't take very long, so please just deal with it for now~"

"You want us to just endure this?!"

Turn it down! Think about the viewers! You won't get any more subscribers!

"Now, then~ I'm hoping to try something out today that streamers of the ancient past once did. First—"

Streamer stepped back from the screen. The picture moved a bit, and a bowl appeared before my eyes.

"—I would like to try this super-spicy dish~!"

Her Majesty was putting her life on the line... Respect, man...

"This dish is especially hot, even among all the spicy foods of demon cuisine. When you eat this at the restaurant, they have you sign a waiver in case you die."

"Is it okay for a restaurant to offer a dish like that...?"

"Oh no, the dolls behind the dish are starting to decay! I wonder if that's an effect of the food?"

“I think the degree of spiciness is the least of your worries!”

“All right, here we go! Ugh, never mind the spice... This is nasty... It makes me want to vomit... A weaker demon might faint from this...”

If it’s so gross, then just let it die...

“If I were to liken these flavors to anything, then it’s like ditch water and muddy water were blended together, with gravel mixed in...”

“None of those things are food, so that actually doesn’t tell me how it tastes...”

“Ugh, this is awful... Truly awful... How does one create a flavor like this...? It’s so bad that I don’t even mind the spice. The spice is an improvement.”

“You’re already veering away the original concept! You’re not supposed to be eating bad food!”

“Okay. This is awful, so I’m going to stop eating now. Everyone, please be careful out there~ Good kids, don’t try this at home!”

I don’t think the bad kids would, either.

“All right, I believe that brings us to the end of our first stream! Those who want to subscribe to this channel, please apply at your nearest public office!”

Don’t bring bureaucracy into this!

“This livestream uses all our demons’ tax money~! ♪”

Do you want more subscribers for your channel, or do you want it to go up in flames? Make up your mind!

Pecora and this ancient civilization should never have made contact...

Pecora starting to stream in itself wasn’t a bad thing.

The biggest thing on my mind right now was—

“How am I supposed to *unsubscribe* to this channel?”

I definitely hadn’t signed up for anything.

“Additionally, for those watching this first projection, there is no way to unsubscribe, so we appreciate your understanding. ♪”

“No! I’m not understanding about this at all!”

I couldn’t believe there was a stream that forcibly showed itself to people!

“Well then, farewell~! Pecking at your heart and pecking at your eyes, this was Provato Pecora Ariés~!”

What are you, a vulture tearing apart your viewers?

The video cut off.

Well, this was a new headache...

All we’d gotten was a warning from Beelzebub ahead of time...



The next morning, I asked the rest of the family, and they all reported seeing Pecora’s stream.

“I was prepared for a fight when the phantasm suddenly appeared, but I sensed no malice. So I relaxed and watched.”

“That’s very like you, Laika.”

Dragons lived in a world of battle.

“I, Flatorte, was prepared to use my Cold Breath to freeze whoever was using the phantasm the second it appeared, but when I saw it was a familiar face, I kept myself in check.”

“The house could have been destroyed...”

Dragons also had very short tempers.

Guess the stream happened in every room of the house in the highlands. What a nuisance this was...

Three days later, another stream started in the evening.

“Good evening~! Pecking at your heart and pecking at your eyes, this is Provato Pecora Ariés~! This is our second stream!”

That’s really the motto we’re going with, huh?

“Today, I want to give a shot at a classic kind of stream from ancient times! We will be painting today!”

People in that ancient civilization did the weirdest things...

“All right, here is a piece of paper. I also have paints and a brush. Let’s get painting!”

After that, the video of Pecora painting went on and on for ages. She was better than I thought. Maybe painting was one of the things a demon king learned how to do.

That aside—this was *long*.

Paintings took time, so the stream just kept going and going.

“Watching the stream of a pro artist is always worth it, but it’s kind of boring if it’s just an amateur...”

I tried turning off the lamp in my room, but the image still shone too brightly to ignore, like a TV in a dark room...

“I think we should try putting some green here~ That isn’t bad, not bad at all~”

Pecora kept talking, too, so I couldn’t get to sleep!

What an annoying stream!

“I know the volume might be a little loud, but please bear with it~”

Oh yeah, the volume was way up, just like last time! Couldn’t she adjust that at least?

“I can barely get a good, restful sleep... Maybe I should go to the dining room and get something to drink...”

I had no idea when the stream was going to end, so I went to the dining room.

—And the same video was playing there!

“It’s being broadcast everywhere in the house?!”

As I stood there bewildered, Falfa and Shalsha came up to me.

“Oh, it’s playing here, too.”

“The sound is making it so I can’t sleep...”

Dammit, now this was harming my daughters. I wished this would just stop

already...

"I think I've done a pretty good job, if I do say so myself~ What do you think~?"
♪

On the stream, Pecora wore a proud, infuriating look.

"Who cares?! Let us sleep!"

"Oh, we've passed ten thousand viewers. Thank you so much!"

Were there seriously ten thousand people watching this?

"I see that broadcasting in more places has worked wonders! I will hope you keep watching~!"

"You unilaterally increased them?!"

This was getting ridiculous, more than I'd imagined... In my past life, there were a lot of YouTubers, but I doubted any of them actually forced people to subscribe. They'd have to hack your computer to do that...

"Now, in celebration of getting ten thousand viewers, I will do something that was apparently very popular to do on streams in the distant past~!"

A song cover or something?

"Yes. I will be doing a live sleep stream~"

Pecora went straight over to the bed in the background of the shot.

"Good night, everyone~! The stream will continue until morning~ ♪"

Just like that, she zonked out. The video was just Pecora sleeping.

"What did the people in the ancient civilization find so interesting about this...?"

This was like recording your pet goldfish... Oh, but people did used to have constant livestreams of nothing but their fish tanks, so maybe there was more demand than I thought.

"It's quiet now, Mommy~"

"I could use this function to observe the ecology of grasshoppers. Shalsha wants to start using this technology, too."

Shalsha apparently had the same idea I did. I had a feeling that was the most beneficial way to use this magic.

“Streamer’s asleep now, so why don’t we sleep now, too?”

We went back to our rooms and fell asleep.

When I woke up in the morning, the stream was gone. I wonder how many people watched until the end.

At this rate, I felt like video streaming would quickly be under pressure to be canceled. Actually, I wished the demons would hurry up and do it already.

It seemed viewer feedback had already been taken into account, though, as the videos evolved dramatically after that.

“Everyone~! Right now you can see a button on the upper-right hand corner of the phantasm that looks like a square within a square, yes? Press that, and it will minimize this screen! I believe there are times where I’m just too painfully cute to watch. Press it when that happens, okay?”

I didn’t think she was ever too painfully cute to watch, but I was glad I wasn’t being force-fed these videos anymore. I gave the button a press, and it shrunk down to the size of a jam jar.

Hey, I’d barely notice it at this size. I could still hear her, though!

“Press it again, and I’ll come back to the big screen~ Give it a go!”

I tended to follow the instructions in tutorials like this. The screen got bigger again.

“Next, I believe that there are times my adorable voice just pains you to hear~ When that happens, press the button that looks like a bell on the lower right. When you do, you won’t be able to hear me anymore. Press it again, and it’s back to normal~”

So they implemented ways to minimize the window and mute the sound!

“Ooh! Now I can live my life without being bothered by annoying broadcasts!”

The streaming videos and all its problems were greatly improved.

“And now, if you touch the small screen to the right of the phantasm, you’ll be

able to see previous streams~ Please use this if there is ever a stream you want to watch over and over again or one you missed and want to see every moment of~”

These crappy streams were starting to get a whole lot more respectable... The content itself still had issues, but the system was decent now.

The advancements of an online society are truly grand, aren't they?

...Oh, this wasn't an online society. If anything, it was a magical society.



Pecora's streams were apparently spreading to the most surprising of places.

When I went to the Flatta guild to exchange the magic stones I got from slimes, Natalie told me about them.

“Great Witch of the Highlands, did you know? The magic streams are the talk of the town!”

“The magic streams... Those are the phantasms projected by the demon king, right...?”

“Oh, I'm not surprised you know about them already~ It's like a fire has been lit in the adventurer community! So many of them are watching the magic streams now!”

Who'da thunk the demon king's streams would end up being popular among adventurers?!

“By the way, how is everyone watching it...?”

I knew what they were watching only too well, but I still wasn't exactly clear on how these adventurers were enjoying the videos.

“At first, a sage heard about these strange phantasms and used all sorts of items to try and create an environment in which he could see them. He then discovered a way to watch. I think they call the process *reception*.”

This sage put way too much effort into the weirdest thing.

“By binding items with a bit of magic, the sage built an environment where it was relatively easy to watch the phantasms. He then told other parties and

other sages how to do it. He is a wonderful sage indeed to share his knowledge~”

Seriously...? It was like missionary work...

“At first, other adventurers were like ‘*What is this?*’ and ‘*I don’t get it,*’ but it’s strangely addictive. More and more people got interested, and the subscriber numbers are skyrocketing.”

This world was already messed up as a fantasy setting, but thanks to that ancient civilization, things were getting even weirder...

“Lately, people generally call them the ‘magic streams.’ It’s the first thing adventurers talk about when they get together in a tavern.”

Adventurers should stick to adventuring.

“Also, when a group of adventurers gathers in places like a tavern to watch the magic streams, other parties end up watching, too, right? That is how they became so popular among adventurers.”

“I see... I get it now.”

Taverns were where adventurers exchanged information.

If a group of people were sitting around and enjoying a weird phantasm, people would wonder what it was.

In case you were curious, I hadn’t really been watching any of Pecora’s magic streams of late. (Now that the broadcasts had a name, I was going to call them that.) It wasn’t like I wasn’t watching them at all. I just preferred to binge when I was free.

“Lately, they’ve been having some intense debates about which streamer they like best.”

“What? There are more than one?”

Only Pecora’s streams got broadcast to our house.

“Yes. The demon king was the only one at first, but the popular ones recently include someone named Pondeli and her Let’s Plays, and someone named Vania, who has been making short and simple cooking streams. There are some

niche ones, too, like this Fatla lady, who talks at length about the excellent qualities of moss.”

Everyone was all over the place!

“It would not be an exaggeration to say they’re in a state of near war. The streamers have gotten popular so quickly. I believe this is because the demon king has taken things slowly, but consistently. Thanks to her, this idea has grown into something magnificent.”

“Yeah, I get what you’re saying—but something about this doesn’t sit right with me...”

The very first person to start anything always has the toughest job.

I thought Pecora was great for paving the way in the field of magic streams, truly. But was it right for this to be so popular here...?

“Um, which demon streamer do you like best, Natalie?”

“Hmm, well... The one I follow the most is the minstrel, Kuku.”

Kuku was in on it, too! I guess it was a great medium for her to share her music widely.

“Would you like to watch a little before you go, great Witch? There are no guests at the guild right now, and the people who do come are all regulars anyway. I don’t believe there should be any problem.”

How was Natalie watching the videos anyway?

I was more interested in that question than anything. I didn’t think Natalie had any training in magic.

“Uhhh. Sure, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course! Let me get the equipment.”

She brought in a massive wooden box, which was big enough to comfortably fit an adult inside. It would get in the way if we put it in our house.

“This is a machine for watching the magic streams,” Natalie said, then opened the lid on the box.

There were all sorts of items inside with which I wasn’t familiar. There were

stones that gleamed eerily and talismans—it was like a storage chest for an item shop.

“There’s a black stone in here, see? Here, we put a few drops of the liquid that sages use to see if there is any magic on an item or not—”

Natalie then produced a bottle that looked like the ones used for medicine. Judging by her explanation, the item’s original use was a bit dubious.

“—and the black stone lights up to show that it does indeed have magical power in it.”

Just as she said, the stone started glowing faintly.

At the same time, the other items inside also started to emit light.

“The other materials react as well, and now we can watch the magic streams.”

A horizontal, rectangular screen was projected onto the guild wall, with *WELCOME* in the center!

“Whoa! This is what it looks like now?!”

“Even those who cannot use magic at all can watch the magic streams at any time like this.”

“How much do these cost, by the way?”

Natalie’s expression clouded slightly. “Um, well...it was quite expensive... A—a million and two hundred thousand gold... I am still paying it off...”

She really went for it!

I mean, she was welcome to it if she wanted... It was rude to mind what other people did with their money...

I went back to observing how this computerlike contraption worked.

After the *WELCOME* message vanished, it changed to a password-input screen.

“Here, I input my subscriber password.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t look at this screen... But how do you input it?”

There was nothing here that looked like a keyboard.

“You write it with your finger directly on the black stone. One, two, three, four. All right, that’s done!”

“Natalie, you should make it a little harder to guess!”

Kinda defeats the purpose of a password!

On the next screen was a whole list of different streamers.

“I don’t have any magic, so I cannot touch the phantasm to move it around. That’s why I use this control panel—”

What Natalie pulled out this time was a thin board with one button in the shape of a plus and two small round buttons on it.

“—from the inside of the mechanism.”

I saw this in my past life... It looked like...it belonged to an Entertainment System... The one developed by that game company in Kyoto whose name rhymes with *bin-zen-toe*... It looked like their controller...

“I can choose an entry by using the directional buttons on the controller. Then I use the left and right buttons to confirm.”

Then the screen changed again.

Minstrel Kuku’s Magic Streams NEW SONG |

I Lost My Key, I Can’t Get Home | Vocal & Instrumental Performance NEWEST VIDEO Uploaded 2 Days Ago 70K Views **I’m going on tour!**

Please check the screen below for a detailed schedule.

“This will take me to Minstrel Kuku’s page. Then I select the phantasm I want to watch. Well, why don’t we check out her newest one?”

Kuku and her lute appeared on the screen.

“Hello, I am the almiraj minstrel, Kuku. The other day, I went out shopping and dropped my key. It was terrible.”

Kuku would start things off dark.

“I went to a locksmith and asked for a new key, but I had no way to confirm I

was the person who lived there, so they did not believe me. Apparently, they need identification because thieves sometimes ask for keys to be made.”

Man, it was a real pain in the butt losing a key... It's best to get a spare *before* anything happens.

“I had to get my neighbors to vouch for me before I finally got my key. In the meanwhile, I started wondering if I even was the real Kuku anymore. I had no way to prove to myself that I was Kuku, you see.”

That was really heavy. I started feeling pensive just listening to her...

“I turned those feelings into a song. Please listen. This is I Lost My Key, I Can't Get Home.”

She strummed her lute and started singing.

“I Lost My Key, I Can't Get Home”

Words and Music: Kuku

Shallow girl like me has shallow pockets

Dropping and losing things left and right

But I still put it all in my pockets anyway

Maybe I just want to hold on tight

I went to the store to get my favorite apples

And when I got home, I stuck my hand inside

But I stopped, I stopped in my tracks

I lost my key, I can't get home

I lost my key, I can't get home

Where should I go home to?

I lost my key, I can't get home

I lost my key, I can't get home

The apples in my bag are so heavy now

I wasn't surprised it sounded like a depressing folk song...

At least it wasn't a love song with that title.

The performance was finally over.

"That was my new song, I Lost My Key, I Can't Get Home. There are three verses in total, but the whole thing might upset some of my listeners, so I stopped here. In the second verse, I sing about the skepticism of the locksmith who wondered if this Kuku girl is really the almiraj."

That brief explanation was dark enough!

"Everyone, please be careful not to lose your keys. Oh, that's right! I'll be going on tour."

On the bottom of the screen, words appeared that read *SANCTUARY FOLKORE EAST: 10/3 | MILFIE OPERA HOUSE 10/6*. Those Sanctuary whatever things were probably venue names.

Wow, they even had captions (or something like them) now.

"I do want you all to see me live. Well, it's more that I believe minstrel music is best experienced live, so those who've heard about me through these magic streams should please come if you can. Thank you so much. This is the minstrel Kuku, signing off! See you next time~!"

Kuku waved her hand, and the phantasm ended.

"—And that's how I can watch the magic stream phantasms. It is a truly revolutionary system," Natalie announced proudly.

I mean, she paid a million and two hundred thousand gold for this, so she could act as proud as she wanted.

"I can't argue with that... Man, even the humans are starting a technological revolution. It's amazing..."

The strong desire to watch the magic streams gave birth to a machine made up of a combination of artifacts. Human desire was a powerful motivator.

If more people knew about Kuku through this and went to her shows, then these streams were the right choice to use as an advertising medium. I had a feeling that the magic streams and Kuku's music career went hand in hand very well.

“It seems like this Kuku minstrel only ever tours in the demon lands, so I can’t go see her, though.”

Then what’s the point in watching this from here...?

“The person who started the streams called herself the demon king. It seems this is a cultural phenomenon in the demon lands. Although, I feel like I’ve seen her in Flatta every once in a while.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right...”

Natalie wasn’t aware that Pecora was the real demon king, it seemed.

It was hard to believe someone with such a casual personality could be a ruler. It was all an act.

“It doesn’t seem as though anyone from the human world has the magical or technological prowess to stream their own phantasms. No one has been able to make it work. The most we can do right now is watch.”

Humans had managed to create an environment where they could watch, but they still weren’t able to broadcast anything yet.

The Thursa Thursa Kingdom’s technological capabilities were nothing to sneeze at, after all. I bet the demons wouldn’t have been able to pull this off with their magic alone.

“There is another magic streamer who has been rapidly garnering lots of attention. Since you’re already here, great Witch, please take a look!”

I had a feeling this was going to turn into a list of recommendations...

Given I wasn’t pressed for time or anything, I couldn’t complain. I’d listen for as long as she wanted.

“Of course, of course. Who’s next?”

“People in the magic-streams community call her Momma.”

Momma?

A certain spirit came to mind...

“She’s someone called the droplet spirit, Yufufu. She calls herself a spirit, so I guess she’s not a demon? Well, that’s what she claims, but I’m not entirely sure

how true that is.”

It really *was* Yufufu!

Natalie used the controller to select Yufufu’s channel.

There she is...

The Droplet Spirit Yufufu’s Magic Streams Just Chatting

NEWEST VIDEO

Uploaded 4 Days Ago

110K Views **I’m the**

droplet spirit.

Nice to meet you~

I love dank places!

But be careful of food poisoning.

Heh-heh, heh-heh-heh.

This was the real thing...

“This streamer has rapidly gained a core fanbase recently, though she only started streaming very recently.”

That meant the streaming technology had reached the spirits.

“All right, let’s watch this one.” Natalie selected one of Momma Yufufu’s phantasms.

The image showed the inside of Momma Yufufu’s house. I’d been there many times, so I could tell.

So she was streaming from inside her home. No studio—again reminding me of a YouTuber.

Momma Yufufu entered from the side.

“Hello there, everyone~ This is the droplet spirit, Yufufu~ You can call me Momma if you want~ How have you all been~?”

Even in the phantasmic images, she was so motherly. There was a magnanimity to her that she couldn’t keep hidden!

There was also something a little different from Kuku’s phantasm, which we’d

just watched.

On Momma's right side, there was something that looked like a chat box.

On closer inspection, I saw things written there like *"Hello," "It's been a while!" "I missed you, Momma!" "I wish I could've been born as your child."*

That last commenter was a bit messed up, so she needed to be careful.

"Oh my~ Thank you for your comments~ Momma's going to do her best today, too~"

Momma Yufufu waved her hand.

"The writing on the right is apparently what people were inputting as they were watching in real time. The demons seem to be equipped with a function that allows the viewers to leave comments."

"The demons are making great strides in their technological revolution, too..."

They were already pretty close to just inventing computers, weren't they?

"Today, we'll be having a chatting stream~ It's like our usual ones, though. Today, I'd like to talk a little about my daughter~ Oh, thank you to everyone who said I don't look old enough to have children. But I am a spirit, so I've lived for a very long time~"

Her daughter? Uh-oh...

"I call her my daughter, but we aren't related by blood. I have a three-hundred-year-old daughter now. She's making a living as a witch~"

She was definitely talking about me!

The chat was reacting: *"Your daughter's three hundred years old, too?" "Three hundred years old and not related by blood... Your family's a little too complicated for me."*

"See, she's just adorable~ She thinks of herself as a very mature and levelheaded adult, but she doesn't have things together as well as she thinks~ She is constantly getting herself into trouble~"

That's embarrassing! Especially when you're broadcasting this all over the world (?)!

“She often tries to be the dependable head of her household and tries very hard to be everyone’s rock~”

Comments like *“Momma/Daughter? Gulp...”* *“I feel like I’m awakening to something new...”* flew up the chat box. *Hey! Stop writing weird stuff!*

Oh my god! Stop, stop! Shut up! This is getting embarrassing and just weird!

And whoever wrote Momma/Daughter must be sick with something! Go to the doctor, geez!

“Oh my, I see there are many of you in the comments asking what makes my daughter so cute~”

I kind of wanted to listen to this, and I kind of really, really didn’t...

“Let’s see~ The top thing I’d say is, well, so she comes into the house. Witches wear pointy hats, don’t they? I don’t know if she forgets to take it off, or if it’s just part of her style, but she typically keeps it on the whole time while she’s inside.”

Does that even matter?!

I had no idea the magic streams would ruin me like this...

And this is going to create more issues, isn’t it...? This is the butterfly effect, isn’t it?

“Also, I suppose she has a bit of a complex over the size of her chest. She looks at mine and makes a little scowly face~ I believe the size of one’s chest is simply a part of what makes an individual, so I think she lets it bother her too much.”

“Momma Yufufu! Stop! Don’t broadcast that! This is defamation!”

Even though I knew there was no point in it, I pressed my face against the (wall with the) phantasm.

“Oh, I thought her daughter sounded a little bit like you, but I see I was right after all.”

Oh no. Now Natalie was going to find out everything...

“A lot happens when you’re alive for three hundred years. I found myself daughters, so of course I could find a mom. Everything has to come from

something else; it's normal for me to have a mom. That is how balance in the world is kept," I argued. Yeah, it was a reach, I know.

"I see... It is convincing when you say it, great Witch..."

"Yep. That's how things are. Nothing weird about it."

Somehow, I managed to get Natalie to come around to my point of view.

Meanwhile, Momma Yufufu's stream kept going.

"Also, my daughter does have a few of her own little children~ She is doing her best to act like a good mother. It's adorable; she tries so very hard to do her best~ I want to genuinely cheer her on~"

Oh, she was complimenting me. I'll take it.

"'Is my daughter or are my grandchildren cuter?' Oh my, you can't rank them like that. They're all so cute~ Can you compare droplets in a cave and droplets from a waterfall? They're both nice~ Oh, I suppose that comparison is a little hard to understand~"

Yes, it was. I'm pretty sure you're the only one who gets that, Momma.

Then, Momma Yufufu looked straight at the camera. (There weren't any cameras in this world, though.) *"Are you watching, Azusa~? I talked about how much I love you today~ Come over again soon~ I'll fry up some pancakes dripping with honey~ See you soon~!"*

"Sure, I'll go. I'll go."

I waved to the phantasm. What, was this a video letter?

"I love you~! Come in waves as much as you like~!"

"Thanks—not quite sure what that means, though."

I couldn't say I loved her face-to-face, but surprises like this weren't terrible every once in a while.

These magic streams that used phantasms—at first, it just seemed like Pecora was being her usual capricious self, but now Kuku was using it to announce her music and whatnot. A new form of communication had been born.

That had to be a very good thing. These magic streams were bringing

happiness to people all over the world, I'm sure.

New problems naturally arose once a communication tool that hadn't existed before was invented, and I still hadn't forgiven Pecora for her nonconsensual streams.

At least she'd added those screen minimization and mute functions.

Momma Yufufu's phantasm ended there.

"—Anyway, that was a stream. It is currently popular among adventurers now, but it may even spread to normal people one day!"

Natalie was more worked up than usual, excited to experience the birth of a brand-new cultural phenomenon.

It might sound like an exaggeration, but the magic streams could be a form of revolution on their own.

I had a feeling, though, it wouldn't be so great if it became ubiquitous...

Demon information was flowing so freely... I hoped it would stop with adventurers.

"Oh yes. I just had a great idea!" Natalie clapped her hands together.

I had a feeling it wasn't actually that great, and I was usually right about these things.

"If you're able, why don't you do a phantasmic magic stream yourself—?"

"No thank you!"

I could get my hands on the mechanisms if I wanted, but I wasn't doing it!

"But great Witch, you could broadcast how cute your daughters are."

My heart stirred a little—a lot, actually.

Was sharing the delights of my daughters with the demons and adventurers not, as it were, a great contribution to society? Was it not my duty?

There had to be at least a hundred thousand people throughout the world who would find the vigor and determination to live through the next day just by seeing how cute my daughters were. It would be like saving the lives of a

hundred thousand people.

Then I remembered the demon minister of agriculture who first came to tell us about the magic streams.

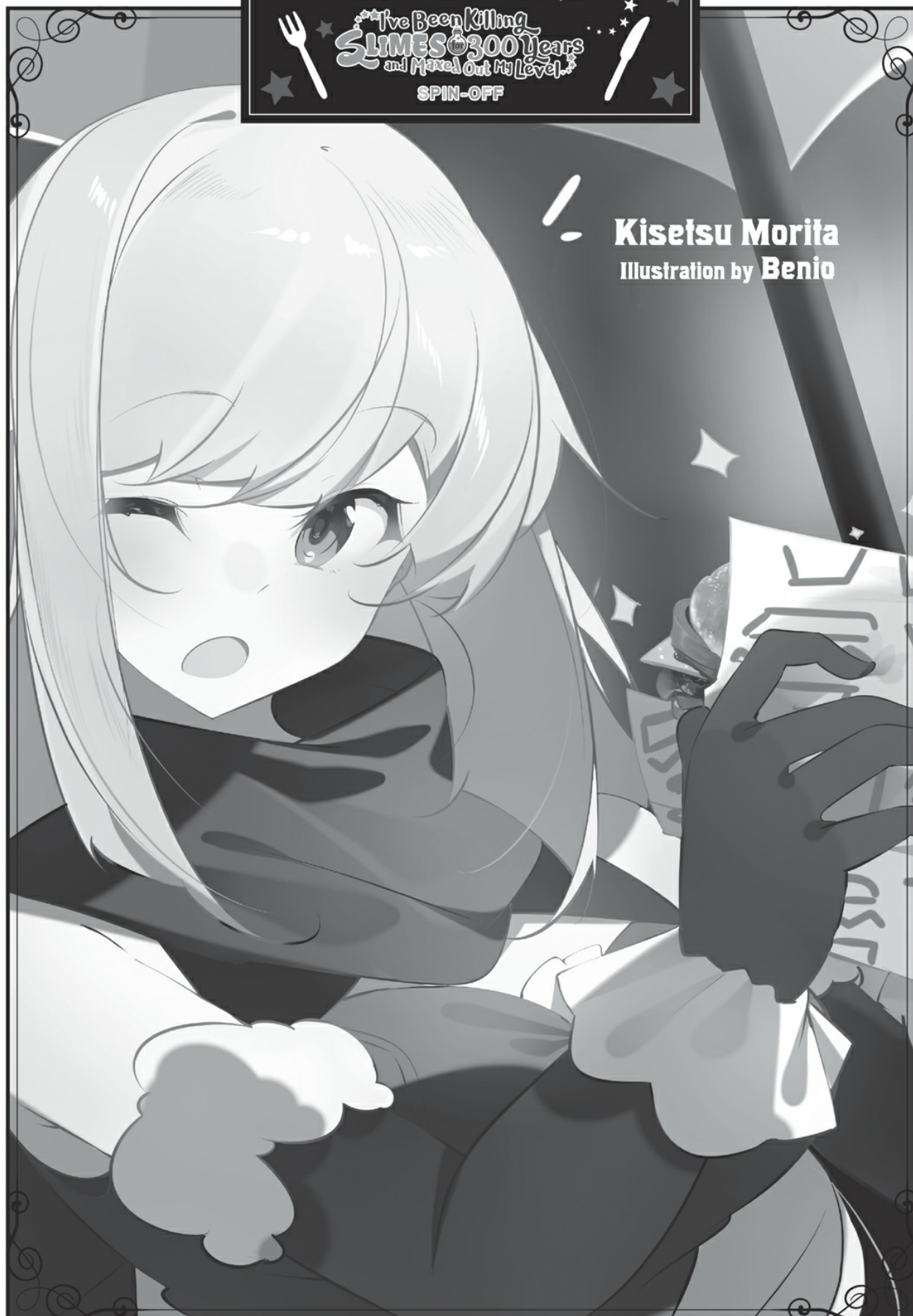
What if there were more people like Beelzebub who'd come to take Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra away? They were all adorable, so the risk was entirely possible.

I might seem biased, but I'm not. That's the truth.

"I think I'll stick to just watching," I smiled and said to Natalie.

The End





Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**



AN OLDER-LOOKING ESTABLISHMENT WOULD BE MORE TRUSTWORTHY THAN A NEWER-LOOKING ONE, RIGHT?



“Nutri-Spirits truly is delicious! It’s a huge hit within the province of Hrant already! We bottle and seal it for a long shelf life, and your unsold product will not go bad! Your establishment can make a great profit with none of the risk!”

“Miss Halkara, you sure talk a lot, don’t you...?”

The man from the other company recoiled a bit, but it’s proper to be this energetic about one’s business. You must be aggressive if you want a potential partner to remember you.

My name is Halkara, and I’m the president of a company called Halkara Pharmaceuticals.

I was born an elf, and I started up my business several years ago as I studied plants and medicine.

Thanks to that, I built up a favorable reputation in Wellbranch Marquessate, where many of us elves lived, and throughout the larger province of Hrant.

With an eye on expanding sales, I ventured all the way to a different province today to do business.

I’ll make this sale and earn lots of money!

“I thought elves were daintier and stuffier, but you’re nothing like that...”

“I’m sorry~ I am simply confident in my Nutri-Spirits, if I do say so myself. I suppose I got a little overexcited. Oh, and most elves are like this. I think the stuffy ones live farther north~”

I was going to take a more aggressive approach with my business this time.

My product was lined up on the table.

“Please take a sip,” I said. “I believe that is the best way to understand its value!”

He would have to once I made the suggestion, and sure enough, he did.

“Hey! I’m not sure why, but it feels like I can take another crack at my job now!”

“Right?! Nutri-Spirits uses a mix of around thirty-six to forty-five different plants, put together in one super-drinkable blend!”

“*Around* thirty-six to forty-five? Do you not know anything more precise than that...?”

“Well... What plants and mushrooms I’m able to procure changes depending on the season... That’s what that means...”

Momentum can carry you over the little details. That is a steadfast rule of business. The person negotiating with you would not understand a detailed explanation of minutia... Part of business is communicating with people who aren’t interested in your product, after all.

“But do you know all those thirty-six to forty-five plants?”

Oh, the question was for me this time.

“Ha-ha-ha! I am the president! Of course I don’t know!”

“You sound very defiant!”

“You see...if you read this document, you can see a list of all the plants! Understand that we are adding improvements every day, so memorizing them all is...too difficult! Yes!”

I upped my momentum to breeze past that. Business talks during business hours also changed depending on who was I was talking to.

The man nodded slowly. “You’re a funny one, so I’ll give it a try. I’ll stock about two cases for a trial.”

“Thank you very much!”

Success!



“My~ The city looks much prettier than when I arrived~”

I made my way through the unfamiliar town with lighthearted skips.

This was my first time trying out this new system—the company let me put my product in their building, and I would get paid based solely on how much their employees used.

Generally, I put my product in stores, but since more people usually meant more sales, the idea struck me to place it in a corporation with many employees.

The employees would get tired working and reach for a drink to combat their exhaustion. Not only that, but other employees would see them drinking it and want to try it themselves!

“Yes, this will work, this will work! I am such a genius! I think this will go swimmingly—and then maybe my profits will soar, too!”

But.

—Despite my good mood...a tragedy befell my body!

“I’m.....hungry.”

Having business negotiations in a faraway land would make anyone tense. Even I got nervous sometimes.

Once negotiations were over, I instantly felt how hungry I was.

My appointment was finished, and the only thing left was to return home by carriage. It was still a little early for lunch, so I could probably just take one first then eat at my destination— But I was here, so I would search for a restaurant!

What should I have? I wanted to use this occasion to be a little adventurous.

I walked down a street lined with many eateries.

AUTHENTIC ELF CUISINE

Nope, definitely not that. I could eat that at home. And there was no such thing as *elf cuisine*. Our dishes were regional—no one would ever advertise “human cuisine.”

ADD UNLIMITED SPICES TO YOUR SPAGHETTI!

UPGRADE TO LARGE FOR FREE!

That place was for boys who ate a lot. I suppose it was rather unique, but I felt like having something a little more ordinary right now.

PASTRIES & TEA RESTIA

That was a café, but I wanted something a bit heavier...

AFFORDABLE EATS

MARRONIE

The atmosphere was quiet but fancy, which wasn't bad. The locals trusted it, at any rate.

Should I eat here? It seemed safe enough. From outside the windows, I could see the seats were well filled. There were already so many people, even though it was still a little early for a lunch break! I could not go wrong with this restaurant.

I shook my head, however.

"I may as well be a little more adventurous... I came here to expand my business. I can't turn around and play it safe with lunch."

I walked farther down the road, and a trim establishment caught my eye.

THE FIRST TAYATART ISLE RESTAURANT IN THE PROVINCE!

CORAL REEF

"What is this? I've never heard of this before..."

There was an explanation on the sign placed in front of the restaurant.



So it was a place that served dishes from the tropical lands to the south. I could scarcely imagine what they were like. Oh, there was an illustration and explanation on the sign. I had to take a close look at the visual information as well.

The illustration suggested this goyan champloon set came with some bread, soup, and about three small entrées. That was reasonable for nine hundred gold. The restaurant had seemingly been built recently as well, and I liked the style.

“All right! I’ll eat here!”

I slowly opened the door.

Not a single customer was inside.

Before me were rows of empty tables and counter seats.

I have a bad feeling about this. I may have chosen wrong... Is no one here because it isn’t good...? Maybe I should leave...

“Hey there, welcome!” the young, bearded manager called out to me.

Aaaaah! I can’t leave now! Plus, the manager is wearing an attractive bandana over his head! I approve.

Oh well. I sat down at a table. I would look on the bright side. It probably only recently opened, so maybe they just didn’t have any regulars. Sure. It was a little early to be eating lunch, too. Most places wouldn’t be full at this hour.

“One goyan champloon set, please.”

“Comin’ right up!”

The manager was in great spirits, apparently cooking behind the counter. I could see pots and whatnot from my table seat.

And...there were two others in the kitchen besides the manager.

A young man and a woman, both human and both tanned from the sun, were standing in the corner.

“Lianne, let’s take the cart to go fishing the next time we’re off~”

“Oh gosh, really~? Are you trying to pick me up~? ♪”

“You could bring other people along if you want~”

Pick her up? He was definitely flirting!

It didn’t matter too much right now, and he was free to pick up whomever he wanted— But that *was* the cooking area, right? Don’t stand there chatting and drawing my attention!

Shouldn’t they be flirting in a back room or somewhere else instead? Plus, there was a strange sense of pressure when there was just one customer and three staff members at the counter... If they weren’t going to work, then I wished they would go somewhere I couldn’t see them.

The inside of the restaurant may be stylish, but I still feel weird! I don’t like it here!

The manager seemed to be around the same age as them, so perhaps he’d just hired friends after starting the business. Maybe that was why he had a hard time reprimanding them.

“Hey, Lianne, look at that customer. Her bazongas are huge!”

Hey! You’re not supposed to talk about your customers! I mean, I can’t stop you, but please do it somewhere I can’t hear! And don’t make Lianne listen to you!

“Oh gosh, you’re right~ That’s amazing~ Boobies shouldn’t get that big~”

Lianne was agreeing with him!

I put a hand to my temple.

Was this a failure? Had I chosen a restaurant that was tidy and new and nothing else? Had they forgotten the basics?

The decorations on the inside were not terrible.

I had never been, but it had a tropical island feel. Pictures of what I assumed was Tayatart Isle hung on the walls. It seemed like the sea there was emerald-green.

Also, I didn't know much about the ocean, so I was not entirely sure, but boards used for riding on waves also hung on the wall. I had a feeling going out to sea on those was suicidal. One would get stranded on a strange desert island at best...

What I did understand was that the bearded owner yearned for life on tropical islands like Tayatart Isle—but I had a feeling he had started with appearances only.

I was certain this restaurant wasn't run by Tayatart Islanders. They should have had some sort of accent but sounded like locals.

Maybe I should've gone to Affordable Eats Marronie instead...?

Was this because I had mistaken foolhardiness for bravery as many young and inexperienced people do...?

No, this battle was not over.

The illustration of the goyan champloon set at the front of the store did look delicious.

This restaurant had just opened and served unusual food on top of that, so they simply didn't have any regular customers. Yes, I was certain that was it!

Perhaps this was my chance to encounter an unknown dish that was truly delicious!

Even the establishment of a stubborn old man could flourish if it tasted good! What was important was the flavor! You might miss out if you judged a restaurant on the atmosphere alone!

“Here you go, one goyan champloon set coming right up.”

The owner brought me my meal on a tray.

By the way, those other two were still chatting. They clearly were not cooking, so why were they here? Well, that didn’t matter. It was time to e— Oh?

Something was off.

I could sense it before I even took a bite.

My elven instincts were warning me. It felt like the forest was speaking to me. Mother Forest was telling me, *This is strange; this is much too strange.*

But what about a dish I had never tasted or even seen before could give me such a feeling?

Yes...

This set meal looked nothing like the illustration out front!

What was *really* awful were the sides!

There were three small dishes in the picture, but in reality, the three dishes had been put on one larger plate together!

Yes, it was the same number of sides, but the amount was certainly different! Plus, one was just your run-of-the-mill pickled cabbage. Some restaurants offered all-you-could-eat on pickled cabbages...

And the main course, the goyan champloon, was also completely different.

First, it was a different color.

The green goyan was still green, not burned black or anything like that, but the overall color of the dish was white.

That was because it was mostly made of bean sprouts!

There were barely any bean sprouts in the image outside. There was just a smattering among all the goyans, supporting the rest of the food as they should. Bean sprouts were white, so visually, they had not made much of an impact in the picture.

But the dish in front of me had way more bean sprouts than goyans! This was

bean-sprout dilution!

He was clearly trying to save money on the goyans, the more expensive and unusual ingredient, and making up the difference with something cheap!

And that still wasn't all.

This goyan champloon itself was watery and full of liquid pooling at the bottom of the plate. It was practically a soup!

This was odd. In the illustration, it was like all the liquidy parts were drained. It wasn't supposed to be watery.

I knew exactly the culprit responsible.

The bean sprouts!

By overwhelming the dish with bean sprouts, it was literally diluted and got all watery!

Even if I didn't know what the genuine dish was like, I could tell. This goyan champloon was not good...

I was almost impressed... My experience with this dish was already bitter, and I hadn't even taken my first bite...

Either way, it was time to dig in. I stuck my fork into the goyan champloon.

It tasted bitter, too.

Goyans were bitter to begin with, and we elves often ate bitter herbs. However, this dish wasn't supposed to be this watery... It was practically a bean-sprout stir-fry at this point... The bitterness overpowered the rest. It served an excellent role as a supporting flavor, but once it came to the limelight, it destroyed everything. Even in a bean-sprout stir-fry, you're supposed to boil away in the water...

I mentally screamed.

I sssccrrreeewwweddd uuuuuuuuppp!

*The above may be unpronounceable aloud, but since this is internal screaming, it's exactly what I said.

As I silently whittled down the goyan champloon, the other two who weren't the manager were talking the entire time. How bored were they?

The girl did not seem entirely bothered by being hit on, but she was playing hard to get so as to not let him think she was too easy.

The boy was straightforward and open—or rather, he was taking the head-on approach. He didn't try to play coy but just invited her to holiday spots. In a way, he was taking a very purehearted approach. He might do well as a knight.

He probably simply thought that playing coy was too much work, but his honest approach was working surprisingly well.

Listening to this conversation was much more entertaining than my meal, so I concentrated on that. To be honest, I scarcely cared about my gustatory sensations.

“Seriously, let's go to the lake. They say it's the closest blue to Tayatart Isle around here!”

“Oh, have you ever been to Tayatart Isle before~?”

“*Pfft*, no, it's too far.”

He hasn't been!

Calm down... Take a sip of water and calm down... These people were likely just the manager's friends. Maybe the bearded manager had a long history with Tayatart Isle— “Hey, boss, why did you open up a Tayatart Isle restaurant?”

“I saw a Tayatart Isle musical performance at the public hall in town, and it really got to me. I want to go someday.”

The owner hasn't been, either!

And *music* started all this!

I wish he'd at least been inspired by the island's cuisine!

“I hear the blue sea stretches for miles down there. I've never seen the ocean before, but I started this restaurant because I wanted to be as magnificent as that one day.”

I'm sorry. I had scarcely any idea what that meant. And those surfboard-looking items were simply for show, weren't they?

With the dead eyes of a fish, I finished the bitter bean-sprout stir-fry and the other dishes.

The smaller sides were dried out, and the soup was just broth.

"Thank you very much. I'd like to pay now." I took out nine hundred gold exactly.

"Sorry, ma'am, but the price on the board is without tax, so the total is nine hundred and ninety gold."

Frustrating, but I took out another ninety gold. They were fortunate I was not the demon king, or *they* would have paid. With their lives.

I exited the restaurant, stepped a little away, then looked blankly up at it.



“It will probably last another six months.”

As I made my way to the carriage station with tired steps, I murmured quietly to myself.

“I messed up...”



It was two weeks after I had Tayatart Isle cuisine.

I was in another province again for work, but this town was nothing like the last one.

It was more like a nodal point between towns. A rest area on the road.

Out front was a spot to tie the horses, and it had with toilets for travelers, just like any other rest area. Behind it— EAST CORTA TEMPLE HIGHWAY

PRAYER SPRINGS REST AREA —sat a calm, one-story building with that sign on it.

Inside, souvenirs and ingredients were sold, and there was also a food hall.

My underlying motive was to get them to stock my products.

The buyer and I had our business talks in the personnel building next to the rest area. He was in control of five total rest areas in the region.

There was a bit of white in his hair, but he seemed like a good-natured person—easy to do business with.

“I believe many travelers along this highway will be exhausted when they get here. It is times like that where Halkara Pharmaceuticals’ medicine and Nutri-Spirits will bring back their energy a hundredfold! I think it’s perfect for your rest area!”

“Oh-ho~! Indeed, all your products keep much longer in comparison to our foodstuffs.”

“That’s right! You’ll have little wasted product, so you can rest easy! And you can just try them on your shelves for a month and see how you like them!”

I made a proactive attack. I had to show how enthusiastic I was, just enough to make the buyer uncomfortable! And then, I would make him say *Okay!*

“If it’s just a month you propose, then we’ll go with that.”

Yes, there it is!

“Thank you so much! 🎵 Also, this will help you sell more!”

I handed over a little sign that said **WE RECOMMEND HALKARA PHARMACEUTICALS WITH CONFIDENCE!**

Next to the writing was a picture of me with my arms folded and a face that said *Looking for challengers!*

Sales differed dramatically between locations displaying the sign versus those without. My homemade products were a bit more expensive per unit, so even the slightest increase in sales had a big effect.

“My, my, you are an elf passionate about her business. It’s difficult to ignore, especially since you are on the picture here.”

“Yes, recently, several restaurants have been including images of their meals, no? I learned from that.”

That goyan champloo restaurant...your death was not for naught. They weren’t dead, though. And I forgot the name of the establishment.

“While you’re here, why don’t you take a look at where we plan to set up the stall? I’m sure that will allow you to rest easier, Miss Halkara.”

“I would be glad to!”

And so I successfully managed to get my products in a corner spot that would most certainly catch the eye.

Yes, this would sell~!

I had more wits for working in management than working as an employee.

Or perhaps companies were too illogical for me, and I didn’t fit in.

In the company where I used to work, we had a weekly morning assembly, but that did nothing for our results. It was just a waste of time.

A company that couldn’t do away with something so pointless because they’d “*always done it like that before*” would not be successful in anything they did. It was just a ritual, and rituals were for priests. You’re in business, so seek out

profits.

“You truly seem like you’re enjoying yourself, Miss Halkara,” the buyer at the rest area said to me.

“Is that so~? If you say that, then perhaps you’re right. My hard work translates straight into sales, so I always see the fruit of it~”

“Adventurers also talk about how fighting monsters makes their stats go up and encourages them. It is nice to see that efforts bring about results.”

Yes, that was it.

It’s hard to keep going without feeling rewarded. Employees generally received regular pay. That was why during work hours, the conditions for rest were constantly moving, and that was not good.

On the other hand, working with impossible quotas was also tough...

—Then a tragedy befell my body once again!

Guuurrrrrgglllle~~~~

All of a sudden, my stomach made a silly-sounding noise.

“My, it seems you’re hungry.”

“Indeed. I always make sure to eat light the day before doing business in order to keep myself healthy.”

One could not conduct business in poor health, after all. People might worry about you if you showed up with a sickly expression, but that did not necessarily mean it would lead to a contract.

My stomach was begging for food.

Now I wanted to stuff myself full. A bit of alcohol to help it go down might be nice, too. Since we were by the road, there were plenty of public carriages as well.

“Well then, Miss Halkara, you can grab a meal before you go right over there, so please use our facilities.”

The buyer pointed to a food hall annexed to the rest area—a food court, really.

One ordered at the counter, secured a seat at any table they liked, then ate there. Once the meal was finished, one took the silverware to the return space.

However, I felt a little bad for the buyer.

It didn't look very good...

Recently, some roadside rest stops had started to evolve, and I knew of some examples where well-known restaurants were opening. This rest stop seemed old-fashioned, though, somewhere likely to serve commonplace dishes.

I could tell because the place looked completely worn out. So did the workers.

Those who had jobs that constantly put them on the road might simply want to eat anything to fill their bellies, but I rarely ever frequented pit stops like this.

I wanted to eat something better! Time to find a shop!

"Oh, since I am here, I wanted to be a little adventurous and find somewhere local to eat. Is there anywhere nearby? Preferably someplace that has been around a while, one representative of the region."

Last time, my gamble earned me an eatery that was new and nothing else, so I wanted to choose a traditional, long-established restaurant this time.

They say many restaurants scarcely last five years. One could therefore conclude that if it'd been open for decades, it must be trustworthy.

Of course, it was difficult to judge on outside appearances alone—renovations could make an establishment look new.

"Hmm, a restaurant..." The buyer thought deeply. "Not many people live in this area, so there aren't a lot. I can't say there are none at all, but...I apologize for not being much help."

I suppose that was inevitable. Rest areas were not for locals.

"Oh, that's all right. Walking around unfamiliar regions is important for my job! I'll just wander!"

I left the rest area and began walking along the highway.

Of course, there were a few roadside shops near the rest stop.

First was a used clothing shop. That was not a restaurant, so it was out.

Then came a shop that sold “sandwiches”—vegetables or meat or whatnot between pieces of bread. It was a familiar sight on the road. It was the Witch Sandwich chain, and there was a picture of a witch. I could eat this anywhere, so it was out.

In front of a minicasino, there was a big banner that read NEW DARTBOARDS ARE HERE! This was also not a restaurant, so it was out.

There was an establishment with pink walls and a sign that read TAKE A REST—ONE STAY: 1500 GOLD... This was a different kind of rest stop, so that was out.

“I suppose there’s no point walking along the highway... There wouldn’t be any long-established shops in a place with lots of development, would there?”

I turned off the main road and entered the side roads. It was instantly quieter here, with no carts or people passing by at all.

“Hmm... This is more in the middle of nowhere than I thought... Might this be a zone with no restaurants at all...? But I do see houses here and there, so there can’t be absolutely zero...”

I continued walking down the street uneasily. It felt like my stomach was going to start screaming for food.

I was so hungry! So hungry that I almost wanted to start nibbling on the nearby trees!

There were some kind of leaves sprouting from the fields. I wanted to dig them up and devour them... No, I would not do that, no matter what happened.

I then entered a side road off the side road—

ALMAR DINING

—and there was an establishment. The sign had the name and nothing more.

It was well-aged. The paint was peeling off nicely, and there was a wooden sign in front of the door that only had an image of soup and a spoon. I suppose with that outside, that meant they were open for business...

...but it seemed very quiet...

I could feel no life coming from the streets or the buildings.

Think of how food is often more delicious during a festival or fair—this was the opposite.

The only thing beyond this point were endless farming fields.

My sole options now were to turn back or go in.

“What a choice...”

Wait, if they managed to stay open this long in such a remote area, then it was entirely possible it was a quality establishment! Plus, if I didn’t go in now, I would never get another chance!

Company president was a job that meant I had to take these challenges!

I summoned my pioneering spirit and opened the door.

The outside might have seemed cold and dead, but *inside*—it was exactly the same.

Again, no one was here.

There were several tables laid out, so it was probably a restaurant, but it was rather dim.

Not only that, but I didn’t even see any staff...

“Um, hellooo...,” I first decided to call out. “Hello? Hellooo~!”

To be blunt, that was a mistake.

If there was no one here to greet me, I should have quickly shut the door and retreated.

Yet for some reason, I was calling out for a staff member like I had been conditioned to do. It was a mistake, I knew.

I was aware of my inner voice yelling at me, *This isn’t a place to venture in too deep! Let’s go a little farther is a thought that kills adventurers! Pull back now, and you can come back later!* However, I was losing out to my common sense that told me, *No one’s here; let’s call for them!*

After a little while—

—a feeble old woman slowly appeared from the back.

“Welcome... Take a seat anywhere you like...”

I already knew.

This was a failure of a restaurant!

“Here you go... Some water...”

The old woman placed a cup in front of me, so I took a sip as I reviewed the menu. The water was lukewarm.

“...Then I will have the ‘A Lunch,’ please.”

“Yes, of course... Sit tight for a moment. My, you’re our first customer today...”

“Oh, is that so...?”

“And you have a great body, young lady. It must be nice to be young.”

“Um...I suppose so...”

I was probably older than this old woman, though...

Since the old lady was doing the cooking, it took a long while for the food to come out, but it wasn’t inedible. It tasted like the cooking of a friend’s untalented mom.

It wasn’t too expensive, but this wasn’t something I would pay money to eat...

The flavor was not well-thought-out—bland, really. There was almost no flavor, in fact. Perhaps because she was doing everything. I wish she had put a little more salt on the chicken. Maybe it’s healthier for you this way, though...

I left the restaurant and slowly gazed up at the building.

“This is definitely a remodeled house.”

It wasn’t an aged, long-established restaurant!

They didn’t need profits because they were not paying rental fees—it was just a shop she opened for fun!

My shoulders drooped, and I returned to the highway with heavy steps.

Then, in an empty, nearby neighborhood, I faced the farming fields and

yelled: “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! I messed up agaaaaain!”

Afterward, I went into the Witch Sandwich chain shop and ordered a sandwich and tea set (six hundred gold).

“Ahhh, this tastes the same no matter where you eat it. That is a huge relief right now...”

I was reminded of the wonders of chain shops.

“This is the flavor of civilization...”

By the way, six months later, I passed by the Tayatart Isle restaurant while on another business trip, but there was a sign out front that said FOR LEASE.

Perhaps they moved elsewhere in search of island life.



☆My Memo☆

Tayatart Isle Cuisine: CORAL REEF

Goyan Champloon Set

900 gold (but tax is not included)

Be wary of any restaurants that are on the main avenues and look too new...

And restaurants where the staff spend most of their time chatting...

As an elf, I am curious to learn what sea grapes are, so if I find an establishment that serves authentic Tayatart Isle cuisine, I would like to go there next time.

I wonder if it's possible to make wine out of sea grapes.



☆My Memo☆

Almar Dining A Lunch

750 gold

I never really feel like going into a shabby-looking restaurant, but it is still sad when they do eventually shut down.

There are plenty of establishments like that, even back home;

I don't go to them, but I support them in spirit.



THERE IS A REASON THEY SAY FOOD TASTES BEST WHEN IT'S FREE, RIGHT?



Hello, I am Halkara, an elf living in the province of Hrant.

Several years ago, I started a company called Halkara Pharmaceuticals, and luckily, it's done very well.

As a reward, I often have my lunches at trendy restaurants near the factory. Money truly is a wonderful thing, isn't it~? I may be an elf, but I like money better than trees.

The restaurant I was going to today was a very popular one near the company called The Sun Café.

Young-looking elf girls had packed inside. The period during which elves looked young was very long, though, so it was hard to tell the difference between people who might be my mother's age and those closer to their daughters'. While the place might have been popular with young people, I couldn't say for sure.

I ordered the seasonal lunch plate (one thousand and two hundred gold, and it came with tea and dessert after the meal).

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Here is your seasonal lunch plate."

A waitress with impeccable posture brought me my food.

She set my plate on the tablecloth, which was decorated with leaf patterns, and some bread and several side dishes were neatly arranged on top. This would look perfect in an illustration!

By the way, a hobby had been spreading recently among girls—they would immediately draw anything they saw that was cute and then boast about it to other people later.

Not only was this impossible to accomplish without artistic talent, but the food would get cold if one could not draw something of quality in a short amount of time. It was a very difficult task. Girls cared about cute things in any era.

I was an elf, so I was relatively familiar with the trends of human girls one or two generations ago, and I'd caught glimpses of how each generation pursued cuteness. I was impressed with how quickly they created those trends.

Meanwhile, elf trends spread slowly thanks to our long lives—once something spread, it did not go out of fashion for a while, so our trends tended to be more easygoing.

In my mother's generation, pocket veils were apparently popular, which they would use to create strings of numbers in cipher and send messages to one another. Couldn't you just use words?

Well, that doesn't really matter; let us take a look at this lunch!

First, the salad. The vegetables were salad thistle, Hrant greens, as well as cabbage and dragon herb. The dragon herb was used as a red accent. The dressing was sour, but there was a bit of sweetness and fullness to it that probably came from honey.

Next was something that looked a lot like jelly... I did not know its official name but guessed it was something fancy-sounding. Yes, that was good, too.

Then...this colorful one was, um, terrine? I think that was what it was called. Yes, it was good.

I tore a piece of the small bit of bread and put it in my mouth. It was crunchy.

I know I'm repeating myself, but it was good. One does not need much of a vocabulary when eating alone. It's a little strange to start digging up words to describe what you're eating when you're alone.

Good. Delicious.

Those were all I needed. And this lunch plate was good. I had no complaints about the flavor.

However—

It doesn't feel like I ate anything!

I don't know why, but it makes me really angry!

I acknowledge that the food had filled the plate very nicely, but the portions for everything was so small! I was not a bird pecking at this food, so I wished they would fill my stomach more!

At least the salad was healthy. I would not know what to do with a fatty, greasy salad.

I would get tired of this jelly if there was too much of it, and I did not need very much of this curveball. So there was no problem with that. If god didn't forgive them for it, I would at least.

But I was not happy with this tiny portion of bread!

A piece of bread about half the size of my fist was just sitting on the plate. Was it supposed to be the main part of the meal? For whom, infants?! I ate more than that for a snack!

Meals were not meant to be fashion statements! They were to live and to eat! None of this was satisfying!

I left the restaurant, and a thought crossed my mind as I looked up at the sky.

"I need to eat."

I needed to eat a mountain of bread.

Not even an elf got her fill on leaves alone!



With that thought in mind, I finished my work and headed home.

There were five of us in the family—my parents, my older brother, and my younger sister.

I went into the living room and found them all lazing about. That was the best word for them, sprawled across the floor like caterpillars.

You might think it was dirty (well, it certainly wasn't clean), but elves took off their shoes when they went into their house. You could step into horse manure

outside, but inside would still be safe.

I was far and away the breadwinner of this family.

My father was in a constant loop of being laid off and rehired, my brother made his living working part-time, and my sister currently worked at a nail salon but always complained about the pay being low.

I knew if I did not start making money, my family would be in trouble, and that was one of the reasons I started my business.

Time actually moves slower in here, I thought as I looked down at my family. Literally, not in the disparaging sense. I was standing over them, after all.

“Welcome back, Halkara.” My older brother lazily raised his hand.

“Yes, I’m back. You seem to be enjoying yourself. It’s nice that the tool shop closed early.”

“Oh, that... I was fired.” My brother’s expression darkened a bit.

“What...?” I understood him, of course. My comment meant *What on the earth are you doing?* “You can at least deal with customers at the shop, can’t you? You don’t even have to talk to them constantly... You can handle that much interaction, can’t you? Was it still too much for you?”

“Your brother was late all the time, and that’s why he was fired~” my mother said sleepily, a throw blanket draped over her. It was nighttime, so she could just sleep in the bed instead...

And fired for tardiness... That was indefensible for anyone...

“Man, I honestly thought working at the tool shop would be easy, but it started so early. They open at nine, so I absolutely had to be there at eight thirty.”

“You would make it if you left the house at eight, so if you woke up any time between then and seven, you would be on time like normal, no?”

“I’d wake up, and for some reason, it’d be one in the afternoon for two days in a row. I musta been a night person in my past life, like a vampire or something. That’s definitely it.”

He wasn't just a disappointment as my brother but as a living being...

My younger sister ignored our brother and was concentrating on painting her nails with something. That was part of her trade, though.

My father was sipping on some cheap alcohol and nibbling on a snack of fried leaves.

He didn't have much in the way of earnings, either, so he couldn't really tell his son to get his act together.

Then, my sister sprang to her feet. She had a baby face, but she had graduated from school and was working now. There was about a forty-year age difference between us. I don't know how many years that is by human standards, though.

"Hey, Sis, you're off from work tomorrow, right~?"

"Yes, I am. What is it? Do you want to test something on my nails?"

My sister grinned, and her smile was hard to hate. My family had very good looks, and my brother had had many girlfriends. He had been turned down a lot, too.

"Mom said we should go out and eat as a family for the first time in a while."

"Yes, I did~ I thought it might be nice~" my mother said placidly.

"Oh yes, we haven't gone out together at all recently."

The reason for that was because our working hours were all over the place. When my father was working overtime and my brother was doing part-time work, they were often busy on weekends and holidays. When I ordered new equipment and whatnot, I sometimes had to go into the factory and take care of the delivery on a day off.

That was the respectable reason. The other reason was—

—my father didn't earn very much, so we could never go out to eat very often...

His wages were low for supporting a five-person family. That was because he frequently changed jobs, so he never got many raises.

Even though all his children were of working age, he was still the one paying for everyone's meal when we went out, so it was hard to support an outing like this. Plus, we ate much more compared with when we were young children, so it cost even more.

That was why everyone was here in such a tiny room...

Soon, I would earn even more money with Halkara Pharmaceuticals, buy a big house, and they all could lie around in a bigger space! Well, they did not need to lie around anymore than they already were...

I would leave that topic aside for later—

We should indeed go out and eat as a family. It would be the first time in a while.

Meals were meant to fill the belly. Without such an effect, all the creatures of the world would die of starvation, so that function was of the utmost importance.

But meals also helped connect people.

"I'm free. Then let us go!"

"Yay! Thanks, Sis!"

My sister hopped and hugged me. What an adorable girl.

"Ha-ha-ha, it's nothing to thank me for."

"Thanks, Halkara. I want some mushrooms. Heard there's a good mushroom shop on West Temple Avenue," my brother said.

"There's no use in thanking me, either."

He must have thought it a miracle that I would come. Even though we had familial troubles, we didn't fight much or anything.

"Mushrooms are good, too. I can eat so many of them! This is a special occasion, so I will eat all I can since I don't have to pay!"

Then, my father clearly looked away.

Not that we were looking at each other to begin with, but he seemed embarrassed.

“The truth is, Halkara, I can’t really afford it and was hoping you’d pay, since you’re the richest person in the family... See, your work is going well, and you must have at least ten million gold in savings, right...?”

To think the day would come when my father would seem so small.

“Um, you know I put some of my earnings into the household budget, right? I will not prevent you from using that to eat out at all.”

“I-if possible...I wanted you to treat us with your pocket money... Our finances are rather scant...”

All of them were working one way or another—except the one who just got fired—yet they were barely scraping by. That was strange, wasn’t it?

Also, I was earning money, but it wasn’t like I was adding a hundred thousand gold to the family funds every month. If I did, they might stop working entirely...

I did most certainly already have over ten million gold in savings. I would not deny that.

However, that didn’t mean I was just coasting by, either. Investing in plants and equipment could easily cost that and more. Most importantly, I did not want to blow all my money on these people.

I could not do that yet. If they got a taste of expensive food and luxury, they would become even more useless.

If my brother ordered all the expensive mushrooms he wanted without even a thought to my feelings, I would be so angry...

These people had big appetites, you see. I inherited their same physique, so I knew well how they scarfed down food. At worst, they would find themselves frustrated like I would be at a fancy café.

In addition to that, my older brother’s useless vibe was very embarrassing. We sometimes went to nice restaurants with good service, but I didn’t really want to take him anywhere too nice... He was mortifying...

I thought for a brief moment.

During the intervening silence, I got the impression my father was nervous.

“Um...it’s okay if you don’t want to... We can cancel... Yeah, we’ll cancel... We can go to Piping Hot with the family’s money. They have unlimited bread rolls there, after all...”

That was a place where students went to get their fill. Eating there as a family was embarrassing in a different way...

“Oh hey, I’ve got a hundred-gold discount coupon for Piping Hot.”

Thank you so much for sharing that information, Brother, but I won’t be using that.

I needed a restaurant where I would not be embarrassed to take my family, one not high-class where we would have enough to eat.

“Very well. I will cover all the costs, so please eat all you like.”

My father and brother smiled with an “Ooh!” which stressed me out a bit...

“However, I will be deciding the restaurant. I hope you understand that.”



Then it was my day off.

I brought my family to—

“Now eat as much as you like. Take as many plates as you please!”

CONVEYOR-BELT CARBS

STONEHOUSE

5TH STREET, NETTLEVEIN INTERSECTION STORE, WELLBRANCH MARQUESSATE

There was a banner fluttering outside the restaurant that said PLATES FROM 100 GOLD! EAT ALL THE PASTRIES AND SANDWICHES YOU CAN IMAGINE!

“Hey, I’ve never been to Conveyor-Belt Carbs before~”

Mother could accept almost anything, so she had a favorable opinion. On the other hand, the other three looked miserable. It seemed they were looking forward to eating something more expensive.

“Eat ten plates or even fifteen!”

The conveyor belt was powered by a waterwheel, and the lane where the plates sat moved past the customer seats.

Most of the food consisted of flour-based carbohydrates. It was, after all, Conveyor-Belt Carbs.

There was bread lathered in butter and jam, bready side dishes, as well as pastries. There was also a dish made of thin dough that had cheese on top and was baked to a crisp.

To put it clearly, every possible thing was bready in one way or another, and these were placed on the spinning lanes. One could choose whatever they liked from there—hence *Conveyor-Belt Carbs*.

According to one theory, they say the idea came about when someone in the castle town in the demon lands used a factory processing-line to send pastries down as snacks, but it was unclear if this was true.

“Oh, so it’s not mushrooms. I was looking forward to eating at a specialty mushroom restaurant...”

“Please buy mushroom dishes with your own money, Father.”

“I thought I was gonna get free all-you-can-eat mushrooms, so I didn’t eat breakfast.”

“It’s your fault for assuming we would be eating at a mushroom buffet, Brother dearest. And please find yourself another job.”

“But mushrooms that other people pay for are a different kind of delicious than usual, y’know? Even stir-fried flabby eryngii tastes way better!”

Just find yourself a girlfriend to make them for you.

And so the family entered the shop.

We came a little on the early side, so there were indeed empty seats. We scored a nice booth table.

The nice part about Conveyor-Belt Carbs was that their seating was mostly booths, so we could all sit together as a family. It was perfect for that. It was not easy or comfortable bringing along small children to a fancy restaurant.

I sat the farthest in, next to the conveyor belt. Beside me sat my sister, then my brother beside her. Opposite me was my father, and my mother was next to him. I was the farthest away from my brother.

The belt ran along the opposite side of the table from the aisle, supplying an endless flow of bready carbs. I was enjoying myself just watching.

“I don’t really understand this, Halkara. I just take whatever I want, right?” my mother asked, as any Conveyor-Belt Carbs beginner might.

“Not just what you want! You need to take the plate as well, otherwise they won’t be able to calculate how much we owe!”

“So the price depends on the color of the plate?”

So she knew that. Mother’s knowledge of this was patchwork.

“Some places use color to differentiate prices, but this restaurant generally uses the same price for everything, which means the color of the plate doesn’t matter. Instead, more expensive dishes use more plates. See how that expensive sandwich has two plates underneath it?”

“Oh, I see~ I understand now.”

“There is also a menu over here, so you can order anything specific that’s not on the belt. It’s all cheap, so please go right ahead and eat your fill.”

It really was cheap.

I was thankful for this kind of establishment. We could eat all we wanted here without drawing unwelcome attention.

You can’t just say *We don’t have enough bread, so can we please have some extra?* in a prim and proper restaurant. There’s no rule that said we couldn’t, but society is filled with tacit understandings.

When it came to places where one could stuff themselves near the factory, my choices naturally narrowed. It was also embarrassing if someone noticed me coming in every day. It’s the plight of a young elf woman, I guess.

Anyway, I just wanted to eat as much as I pleased until I was full! It was time to eat all the carbs I craved!

I did not need appetizers like salads or anything like that. Why not start with the forest blessing pockets (bread stuffed full with slices of rare tree nuts—five plates)?!

I had secured a position right next to the conveyor, so I could move my hand in the blink of an eye and snatch up my prey.

Oh!

Look at that—three plates of the favorite forest blessing pockets in a row came chugging by!

The nuts spilled from the gaps in the bread. Crushed, crackly, and curly nuts were sprinkled over it, adding an accent to the texture of a thick elf akebia steak between the slices—it was a substantial dish! The slices of other kinds of large nuts produced a multilayered deliciousness!

Even within Conveyor-Belt Carbs: Stonehouse, this was the most expensive dish—but it also brought the biggest bang for one's buck! *Now, time to eat!*

“Oh, Sis, could you grab that forest blessing pocket for me?” my sister asked.

“I want one, too,” insisted my brother.

What?!

Oh no.

Since I was next to the conveyor, my only role was to grab things for other people!

Actually, should we really be starting off with a five-plate dish?

Would they not prefer to hold off on that for a moment and start with something cheaper?

Oh, it didn't matter. I had already said I was going to pay. Complaining would only make me seem stingy. There was still one left anyway.

“Go ahead. Don't eat it too fast.”

Now, for the last one—

“Hey, that looks good.”

My father, who sat opposite from me, took it.

No! They were all gone! And it was my family who took it from me!

“Woow, this bread looks so good~!”

“Seriously. I think this was a way better choice than a mushroom buffet.”

I was furious with my sister and my brother. Anyone who wants to complain about my narrow-mindedness first has to pay me a thousand and five hundred gold.

“Sis, grab me the quality walnut roll next~”

She was asking me for a three-plater next (three hundred gold)... There were plenty of one-hundred-gold dishes, so I wanted them to choose those.

Had I made a terrible mistake...?

My family did not understand the concept of restraint, so they would gleefully pick all the expensive things. The thought of working up to the better goods was beyond them.

There was now a real danger of this becoming considerably expensive.

If I knew this would happen, I should have chosen a shop where all plates were a hundred or a hundred twenty gold...

If they only picked expensive dishes, our bill would be the same as in a normal, proper restaurant...

As the blood drained from my face, someone reached their hand out.

My mother took two plates at the same time.

“All the portions are small, so it’s better to take two at once~”

Where did she learn to take two at a time...?

Okay...it was time for me to forget about my family. I just needed to concentrate and eat only the things I wanted to eat. My family was no longer here. I lived alone!

“Halkara, grab that premium fluffy wheat roll.”

“For me, too, Sis.”

Except that was clearly impossible!

“Actually, forget the premium fluffy wheat roll, Halkara. Don’t take the root-

veggie salad roll next to it. Pretend you'll take that chicken salad, but then actually just take the first premium fluffy wheat roll."

"What game are you making me play here, Brother?!"

This is a restaurant, not a memory game!

—Later, my family finally got their fill of Conveyor-Belt Carbs.

As for me, I was so restless that I scarcely felt like I ate...

I had wanted to eat slowly and savor the cooking without being bothered, and I had done the exact opposite of that.

I had no idea that Conveyor-Belt Carbs would lure me into such a trap...

These places were not to be underestimated... Rather, my family was not to be underestimated...

Oh yes, and the bill.

In total, it cost around thirty thousand gold... A course meal could easily cost this much...

I suspect it was my sister's three steak sandwiches. This was not an all-you-can-eat establishment, so her mentality that she had to get her money's worth by eating as much as she could was not welcome here. That would change the whole point...

As I paid, I thought quietly to myself:

I messed up...

I had to be systematic when it came to choosing a restaurant.

I fiercely vowed to myself that, family or not, I would not indulge them.

But this would not be the end of this...

To make matters worse, my brother and sister had overeaten, started feeling nauseous during the carriage ride, and vomited when we got home.

How stupid are they...?



Later, I visited Conveyor-Belt Carbs: Stonehouse, 5th Street, Nettlevein

Intersection Store, Wellbranch Marquessate on my own.

I would get my revenge. No, I wouldn't destroy the establishment or inflict other kinds of violence.

When I sat down at my counter seat for one, I briskly raised my hand.

A server rushed right over.

"Excuse me, could I have a strawberry parfait, extra thick pancakes, a fluffy fountain cream roll, and some candied fruits please?"

The server gave me a look that said, *Are you eating all that on your own?*

"It's all right. I can stomach it all, so please bring it over!"

Afterward, I indulged in a sweet dessert heaven.

Yes, the sweets at Conveyor-Belt Carbs were also high quality. I would say that schoolgirls stopped by after class just for this.

It also cost so much less than a specialty dessert buffet! I could come here every day!

I took a big bite out of the fluffy fountain cream roll. Cream spilled from the bread as a smile spilled across my face.

The extra-thick pancakes came with butter and honey. Pancakes were said to be the great enemy of a diet, but I would give in to temptation. It was so simple, yet delicious!

I cleansed my palate with the sour strawberries in the strawberry parfait, then gracefully ate the candied fruits. Oh, this was the taste of the upper class!

"I hew ih; ih is beh-her to enhoy wuh's food ah-hone~! ♪"

Afterward, my stomach felt heavy from all that food, but I didn't mind.

This weight was proof of my glorious indulgence.

The End



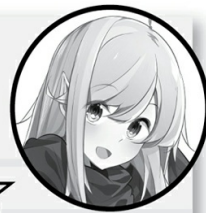
☆My Memo☆

The Sun Café

Seasonal Lunch Plate 1200 gold
1200 for a pretty picture.

This is a nice restaurant for girls who can fill their stomachs with aesthetics. Places like this—as in, pretty restaurants—are important.

It is crucial to maintain one's femininity. The moment we let go of our sense of beauty, men and women of all ages become elderly (a proverb I made up just now).



☆My Memo☆

Conveyor-Belt Carbs:

STONEHOUSE

5th Street, Nettlevein Intersection
Store, Wellbranch Marquessate

There are many larger restaurants along 5th Street that I can go in with my family, making them convenient to visit.

They are popular, so please note that at noon and weekend/holiday evenings, they will sometimes make you wait.

Their side-menu dishes have been soaring in quality, which may seem as though they are focusing on the wrong things, but strangely, for them, it appears to be the right choice.



AFTERWORD

Long time no see, this is Kisetu Morita.

We have finally come to Volume 8 of *I've Been Killing Slimes*.

I've started my eleventh year of writing light novels, and this is my first time getting to the eighth volume in a series. The two runners-up ended at Volume 7. Basically, this is a new record for me, so I'm getting a little emotional.

By the way, one of the series with seven volumes—*You Call That Service?*—was also published by GA Bunko, the publisher of this series, so please give that a search if you are interested. (This is my direct marketing.)

Now then, as usual, I have lots of information I am bringing to you today.

First, the third volume of the comic adaptation is on sale basically at the same time as this Volume 8! The official release date for the comic is one day earlier, so I believe it is on shelves already!

In commemoration of this (almost) simultaneous release, we will be holding a double present campaign!

You can win a B2-size wall scroll that uses the cover art for both volumes!

While there is a lottery for the wall scroll, everyone who enters will get a lock-screen wallpaper, so please enter with gusto! The cutoff date for entering is January 12, 2019.

Next: We will be releasing a third drama CD!

Volume 9 of *I've Been Killing Slimes* will also be simultaneously released alongside a limited, specially bound edition that comes with the drama CD!

Additionally, it should be going on sale in March. It would make me very happy if you prepared for the limited edition by saving up your New Year's money or maybe giving a little less to your younger relatives this year! (How

petty!)

If I were to write a bit about what this third volume is about, it centers around the twins, Falfa and Shalsha.

We have already written the script, so please look forward to seeing not just the twins but also Azusa, Laika, and the other characters in action!

Also, the comic adaptations have surpassed 450,000 total copies sold!

The comic version alone is up to 450,000, which means adding the novels to that creates an unbelievably large number...but like with Azusa killing slimes, I am happy to move forward slowly and surely with the novels.

Now that there are three volumes of the comics, I believe that Azusa and the gang, drawn by Yusuke Shiba, are starting to adopt some characteristics that are unique to Yusuke Shiba. I would be very happy if you supported Azusa and the gang and all that they do in the comics as well.

And for my last announcement: The extra story of Beelzebub that was featured in Volumes 5 through 7 will be getting a comic adaptation!

Meishi Murakami will be in charge of the art! It will be serialized in GanGan Online starting this winter!

To those wondering if it will be over very quickly because there were only six chapters in the novels, never fear! There will be plenty of new episodes!

I was lucky enough to get a glimpse of the storyboards, and I saw Beelzebub's coming-of-age story is drawn entirely differently from Yusuke Shiba's adaptation of the main story!

Azusa got stronger without realizing it, but Beelzebub made what efforts she could to not embarrass herself as a demon minister. As the author of the original novels, I would be truly happy if you cheered her on in her dedication.

Speaking of Azusa getting stronger without realizing it, she becomes even stronger in this volume.

I feel like I might get comments jabbing at how she wasn't already the strongest in volumes up to this point, but it's normal for battle-genre works to have power creep, so, well...nothing too strange there. Not that this is a battle-

genre story.

While meeting so many family members and friends with the house in the highlands as her base, I wanted to show that Azusa was also growing, so I included an episode where she does get stronger.

In the meantime, the demons have started on some weird ventures using ancient magic. All sorts of change happens in this volume. Of course, the characters don't go through massive changes, but I would be happy if you enjoyed the minor ones they experience.

Also, I have included some spin-off short stories at the end of this volume about Halkara and her struggles with food!

Additionally, though this tale does take place in a fantasy world, some of the author's own experiences are included here. One of my hobbies is wandering around to different places in Japan, and I have come across unexpected foods in those places... These stories are filled with the results of my data collecting (?), so please enjoy!

Finally, my acknowledgements. Thank you to Benio, who has drawn so many charming illustrations, including those of the new characters!

When I saw the cover of this volume especially, I felt like this one was extremely slick. Since we have a campaign going on where you can win merch with this illustration on it, I want to see samples soon.

To my readers, thank you so much, truly, for supporting me!

I will see you next time in the new year, in Volume 9!

Kisetsu Morita

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